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The Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

Prabha Thacker
THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN A NATIONAL CRISIS

PRABHA THACKER

"WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE PHYSICAL LAWS OF NATURE, WE ARE STILL MASTERS OF OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE DESTINY, FOR GOOD OR ILL."

E.F. Schumacher Small is Beautiful: Economics As if People Mattered

By definition, a situation of crisis is an occurrence of a series of events that challenge the capabilities of the system and necessitate other than normal procedures to restore a balance. A crisis has an element of non-participation on the part of some who are parties to the conflict, due either to their compliance, or failure of their 'intelligence' to detect the aberrant signals, or due to other communication mishaps. Being an abnormal situation, its handling requires articulation of communication structures and their utilization. Viewing communication structures from the vantage point of a crisis situation, can provide an opportunity to measure the relative efficacy of different media and channels, and to see communications at work—promoting or hindering national integration.

One can therefore conclude that communication structures offer an assemblage of ideas needed to bring about a radical reform in our contemporary social, economic and political structures for the benefit of mankind, as a whole. Nowhere perhaps, does this have more significance than during a crisis situation where the intensity of information in terms of volume, frequency and flow is at its maximum, implying an almost exhaustive capacity to handle and disseminate information.

Media in a crisis situation becomes both an intellectual and/or emotional life system, feeding messages to the masses and influencing their ideas, opinions and experiences. The subjectivity and objectivity criteria of media coverage becomes thus a debatable issue.
INFORMATION:

There is perhaps no field of human activity where information does not exist. Communication and information form the basis of any development process. One of the main obstacles of media utilization is the absence of an organized information base in which crisis situations have been well documented. In recent times, where the need to communicate has become extremely necessary, such gaps in knowledge about crisis situations, whether man-made or those resulting from natural disasters, can cause more harm than good through either misinformation, distortion of information, lack of information, generalizations and assumptions, which subsequently result in ineffective or misguided policies and programmes, despite their well meaning intentions.

Like the proverbial grass on the other side of the fence, one often hears expressions of the lack of information, of the need for information... if anyone had the information! In reality, when the information is made available, very little use is made of it. The issue is therefore one of not only generating information to fill gaps in knowledge, but of organizing and making it readily available to users. Information thus becomes the lifeblood for further research action, policy guidelines and for programme implementation. And media, as the carrier or facilitator of information capitalizes on information, as a resource.

Information today is a prized asset. It has become a viable commodity of commercial value. Information technology and the phenomenal growth of information which, is so readily absorbed, synthesized and analyzed, gives media an edge, in terms of spontaneity and its ability to capture the imaginations of heart and mind.

INFORMATION AND MEDIA:

Information has become the common heritage of mankind. Thus conceived, the responsibility to "develop" is to provide access to information, which is a common resource. These gains, translated into knowledge and practice is a right of the present generation, which it owes to the future generations. If information as a resource is to be used, its value must be realized. It must be used with rationality and not exploited to meet the demands of information hungry societies, for sensation and for merely 'filling up the gaps'.

If we conceptualize information as a common resource belonging to all men, it is not limited then to any person or group of persons. Media accountability to the society, nation, and the world becomes a sine qua non of social endeavour. How then does the media assume its responsibility for the future generation? How does it emit values, knowledge and practice in the fulfillment of its responsibilities?

MEDIA AND THE THIRD WORLD:

The UN Charter that 'Evryone has the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through the media', is enough for food for thought. How this right is endorsed in the UN Charter, or how it is to be exercised, is subject to variety of interpretations, particularly in the midst of the international debate of the New World Information Order.

The concern for distributive justice and equity is applicable within a conceptual information and media paradigm. But in the context of the Third World, there are inherent constraints that limit free flow of information due to socio-economic reasons as well as externalities and interventions beyond our control. All of these impinge upon our meager resources, high levels of illiteracy, poverty, low levels of technology, etc. which, however, are not within the scope of this paper. With regard to paucity of information in the Thirds World, and in terms of the constraints under which media professionals work, some inherent constraints may be cited as:

- The relatively low importance given to the media profession in the region, and inadequate representation of media practitioners at policy making levels of government.

- the restricted circulation and utilization of developmental media, limiting its access mostly to the country of origin.

- the notable absence of those works in international referral systems, which is indicative of the tremendous isolation in which media groups and professional groups are confined.

- lack of inter-country linkages among information and communication professionals, practitioners and researchers.
o lack of co-operation and contact between professionals working in the media and others working in related areas, to ensure that information output fully reflects the needs and priorities and "the real lives" and responses of those, it is intended to serve.

o little sharing of information materials between countries in the use and production of media.

o duplication of efforts due to work in isolation and consequent wastage of resources;

o poor dissemination and difficult access to available information due to bureaucratic procedures in most institutions.

o proliferation of information processed and analyzed in the West, which overlooks local perceptions and interpretations.

This lack of communication leads not only to the absence of mutual co-operation amongst media specialists and agencies; but also the impossibility of access to new approaches and opportunities for comparative assessments and scientific advancement in reportage in subject areas of concern, that are basic to a nation's development.

In the midst of changing concepts and paradigms about development and economic growth, emanating from disillusionment with economic models and yardsticks of development, which dominated Third World development for so long, we now see a coming together of alternative development theories. These define the parameters of development outside reductionist theories and show concern for a holistic integration of both mind and body. The call for a new information order stems from this very foundation.

STATUS OF MASS MEDIA AND JOURNALISM IN NEPAL:

Print Media: Historically speaking, the evolution of print media set in when a hand-press was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the century a few books were published and by the turn of the century a magazine and a weekly newspaper also came into being, although the former did not last long, whereas the weekly evolved into the present-day national daily. The Gorkhaptra.
Before the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951, however, the mass media in a true sense of the term, did not develop. So it was only during the last forty years that the mass media in all its form, began to take shape in its modern form and content.

The capacity of the print media has now risen to 1000 printing presses, of which many are equipped with offset processes. Two national dailies, one Nepali and another in English, command the highest circulation, ranging from 12,000 to 30,000. These are published by the Gorkhapatra Corporation in addition to other publications, namely the Madhuparka, Yuva Manch and Muna, all Nepali monthlies, which command equally high circulation, ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 and two English weeklies; Saturday Entertainment and the Sunday Despatch, which command around 10,000 circulations. Besides these corporate sector print media, there are 59 dailies, 350 weeklies and 47 fortnightlies which constitute the private sector print media.

In terms of language use, 93% of these newspapers use Nepali, 6% use English, while the rest use other languages. In terms of geographic distribution, 16% of the dailies, 14% of the weeklies and 12% of the fortnightlies are published in Eastern Nepal, 10% of the dailies, 73% of the weeklies and 70% of the fortnightlies are published in Central Nepal; 10% of the dailies, 7% of the weeklies and 9% of the fortnightlies are published in Western Nepal; 3% of the dailies, 4% of the weeklies and 4% of the fortnightlies are published in mid-Western Nepal. The Far Western region of Nepal does not have dailies or fortnightlies, and only 2% of the weeklies are published in this region.

There are also numerous magazines which have had limited survival rates. Between 1950 to 1960 there were not even 100 newspapers, but after 1962, when the licensing requirements were liberalised, newspapers mushroomed five-fold.

This mushrooming is however a completely urban phenomenon, as most newspapers come out either in the capital city or in other big urban centres. Distribution pattern is also highly biased in favour of urban areas. Foreign print media, particularly from India, find their way into border areas and many urban centres, in a substantial number.

Advertising Revenue: During the eighties, the corporate sector newspaper enhanced revenue earning capacity substantially. Whereas the private sector newspapers continued to depend on subsidy from government. During the fiscal year 1987-1988, the corporate sector newspapers earned Rs.22.7 million rupees on account of advertising only.
Electronic Media: Nepal Radio, which came into being in 1981, virtually marked the beginning of electronic mass media communications, although skeletal telecommunications and private radio communication systems did exist, which served the purpose of interpersonal communication.

As present radio has the most extensive reach and is the most effectively used media, among the electronic media. Besides the short wave transmission which has the potential to cover the whole country, though less effectively, the medium wave transmission covers about 55% of the population. As of 1981, there were just over 180,000 radio sets in use throughout the country. While there are four broadcasting stations, spread over Eastern, Central and Western Nepal, the facilities for two-way radio links exist in almost all the 75 districts.

Most radio sets are in the hills with a ratio of 1 for every 68 people; in the plains, for every 95 persons there is one set and in the Mountains, for each 118 persons there is one set. But the listening audience may be much larger than the household audience. All the same, radio is the only mass media which has penetrated rural mass in deep interiors. Radio Nepal broadcasts almost daily, rural programmes either produced by itself or sponsored by line agencies. Radio runs 14 hours a day, except Saturday when extra two hours is added.

It also runs a variety of commercial advertising programmes, some of which are development-oriented, like promotion of Nun Chini Pani or Jeevan Jal. This is basically a programme on public health and rehydration for the rural population.

Advertising Revenue: During the fiscal year 1987-1988, Radio Nepal earned advertising revenue to the tune of Rs.12 million.

Television: This media came into being formally in 1985 when Nepal Television started to broadcast TV programmes for the first time in the country. Normally it runs about 6 hours a day. Programmes include news broadcasts in Nepal and English. From the main station in Kathmandu, there are two more regional stations and one sub-station they relay national programmes. It covers about 20% of the land with 4 transmitters having power range from 100 watt to 2 kw. It managed as a corporation with more than 400 employees of different categories and levels.

It is estimated that there are more than 50,000 licensed sets but the viewing audience may be five-fold more. And if unlicensed sets are also taken into account there may be about 5 sets per 1000 population. Nepali and English are used in most programmes. Most programmes are produced by itself and some are imported from foreign countries. The
Corporation is in the midst of implementation of its five year plan, which envisages to cover eventually 63% of the total population and to increase broadcasting to 8 hours. During the fiscal year 1987-88, it earned advertising revenue of 5.2 million rupees.

Support Service: There is one national news agency called Rashtriya Samachar Samiti and a number of recording laboratories such as WIF and audio cassette production centres. The national news agency is in the public sector and has monopolistic control over collection and production of national news. It has more than 30 editors and other support staff, about 10 correspondents at the zonal level and 64 stringers in different districts. It gathers foreign news also on exchange basis with foreign news agencies like AFP, AP, TASS, PTI etc.

There are more than 1000 advertising agencies and about 30 agencies with foreign bases.

It is estimated that there are about 25,000 VCR sets, 250 cassette renting places and about 200 exhibition halls of sorts.

MEDIA AND CRISIS IN NEPAL: THE ADVENT OF DEMOCRACY

There is a crisis in Nepal – we have moved from the partyless panchayat system to a democratic form of government. Tracing back events that have led to the present day situation in Nepal, as we await to hear the results of the general elections held on May 12 this year, we will see how the media has played a dynamic role in igniting the spirit and minds of a population of 17 million men and women who lived under the yoke of a partyless panchayat system, for that past three decades.

National and especially international media has played a role in heightening public awareness and concern. As word spread of people’s movement against the regime in February last year, formal networks and linkages immediately developed through informal networks such as personal communications and contacts. The swiftness with which the media mobilized the masses for democratic change, would not have been possible if not for international political support and media interests. Technology provided the backstop in terms of transfer of information and easy access to a large volume of information.
For example, highlights of the democratic revolution in Nepal for the first time had extensive coverage in major media channels, such as major newspapers e.g. the New York Times and World Financial Times. This heightened awareness and increased focus on this small Himalayan Kingdom, and pressured the monarchy to concede to the masses to promulgate a democratic constitution. Democracy was brought to the Nepalese people for the first time in over three decades.

During the crisis the people of Nepal were not questioning the country’s sovereignty but were raising the issues of defining “insiders” and “outsiders”. The mainstream media, supported by and controlled by the government, continuously withheld “bad” information. While people fell dead on the streets or were fatally wounded, Nepal radio and television relayed stereotype news of mundane local and international coverage. BBC, All India Radio, Voice of America were the real feeders of information to the people.

Confronting the government to ensure a better deal, the agitation created a crisis since it brought into operation insulatory mechanisms like the Army, police and intelligence agents to reduce, even halt the transaction of information flows between different subgroups, in an effort to crush mass uprising which spilled into uncontrollable proportions within days.

This crisis highlighted the problem of insularity. A system which had closed all its apertures had suddenly become visible and exposed to the international world. Such a high degree of insularity had formerly meant virtually cutting off all areas of interaction with the wider social system. Without such interaction, the insular state may have well become integrated at the sub-system level; but by the same token, had weakened integration at the national level.

The central government’s entire strategy was to ensure that this did not happen. A complete breakdown of integration was already evident. The panchayat system, which had maintained a high degree of political insularity, by virtually cutting off all areas of political interaction, restricting political thought and consciousness, within the framework of a single party system, was now being challenged in the language of the public, through the media, and a highly efficient and informal communications system.

Any questioning of the panchayat system or any attempt to develop new paradigms for political consciousness beyond the status quo, had hitherto been looked upon with suspicion, as being “anti-national” Likewise the expression of political consciousness by the media was repressed. Therefore, rather
than being a spokesperson of public concerns and "watch dogs" of government, media, under the Parchayat System was primarily a vehicle for the government to popularize its policies.

MEDIA AS CONSTRUCTIVE AND/OR DESTRUCTIVE FORCE

Several questions can be raised with regard to the present crisis, if we refer to its definition, as a resolution of conflict, set to bring about a political and social transformation.

The media has served both as constructive and destructive force as is evident from events around the world. Particularly in the third world countries, the mainstream media has always been supported by the government in power and has been compelled or coopted to publicize the "good deeds" of the government. It is a well known fact that whoever controls media, controls people's minds. It is important to understand media as a maker of ideology, of public opinion and shaper of social values.

The effect of media is like that of environmental pollution—we do not see it, but we are exposed to it, all the time. This is dangerous, because we do not even know who gives us the messages. Media has a two-way relationship with reality:

it reflects and also influences it. Media is controlled by the class in power. Electronic media has made possible the quick and wide dissemination of messages, and it is easy to be centrally controlled. Media, through such advances in technology, can distort reality e.g. by giving more exposure to urban lifestyles and environments, it gives the impression that the urban is more prevalent or dominant than the rural.

In Nepal, how was the democratic movement sustained, and what channels were used by the supporters of the movement? Mobilization of mass support by the agitators was possible through an imaginative strategy of communication, by the opponents of the panchayat, through underground activities. Those that were working underground for 30 years had well established links and communication channels, through which they expressed their political ideologies. Alternative media played a crucial role in sustaining the movement, by distributing pamphlets, leaflets etc. to educate and sensitize the Nepalese masses in rural and urban areas.

The mainstream media still remained a mere tool of the ruling power and served only the urban population, excluding the masses in the rural areas. In the midst of public uprising on the streets, the official newspaper "Gorkhapatra" on February 19—covered as the main highlight, the inauguration
of the International Airport by King Biradra. The beginning of the democratic movement was headlined as "Extremists attack rally." Another article in the same government-controlled newspaper with the largest national coverage, interpreted democracy as the acceptance of people's mandate for the Panchayat System.

Various communication strategies were adopted by the organizers of the movement. Popular support was organized, not only within Nepal, but outside as well. To get support from the local people, slogans were written in Nepali in public and private places against the panchayat system. Pamphlets and leaflets were distributed and were also used in mass media, as well as in traditional media. For example, to communicate their program of action on a certain day the agitation leaders would contact those who had telephones in their homes, asking them to pass on the message in the neighborhood. At the end of a pamphlet message for example, they added in inverted commas, "pass it on to the next person". The underground pamphlets highlighted the failures, atrocities and repressive measure of the panchayat system. The power of informal media and of informal communications was quite evident - it surpassed all limits of a restricted formal system. Empowered by their own ideologies for a just state, and by messages they absorbed through alternative media channels, the people were energized to find new options and strategies that set a steady pace for change.

"Black outs" during the following weeks, for example, proved an effective method of mobilizing people under the shield of darkness, men women and children emerged from their homes onto the streets, shouting slogans against the Panchayat. Never before perhaps in Nepal's history, had the media been so activated, denoting the positive co-relation between conflict and media activism.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The violation of human rights was the centre piece and driving force of the movement. The global concern for human rights was by the entire movement for democracy which was strategized around the concept of the violation of human rights, in Nepal. This strategy proved to be extremely successful at rallying international interest.

The all pervasive nature of Human Rights extends beyond national and international boundaries, limitations of race, ethnicity and culture. This allowed for an interplay of political consciousness among intellectuals, activists, and academicians which was a visible and viable strategy. For example, the Human Rights Centre of Columbia University in New York City, held seminars and discussion groups on the ongoing violations in Nepal. Nepalese students at
universities around the United States, and elsewhere protested and brought an international focus of concern to the democratic struggles in Nepal. International Human Rights organizations such as Asia Watch, also contributed greatly to bringing about a more global concern, by publishing reports in their journals and publications, describing the daily abuses and human rights violations in Nepal.

Human Rights issues and violations grabbed the focus and sympathy of international attention. While international media networks supported, analyzed and publicized and highlighted the rigidities of the panchayat system, many mundane issues specific to the problems of Nepal were being highlighted by the national media. It was the international media that relayed the voices of the Nepalese masses. As the struggle gained strength, however, the national media began to play a more definitive and decisive role.

The national media such as the radio and TV, were critical of past government policies, but with considerable restraint. It was the alternative media that openly called the panchayat to book.

CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT
The main points around with alternative media basically consisting of print media, relied were e.g.

- The governments unmindfulness of the illguarded and ill defined border with India. The open border system has been a cause of much discontent in the past due to continuous influx of migrants into Nepal and vice versa.

- Fake citizenship certificates to migrants during the referendum of 1983.

- Politicians responsibility for the inclusion of foreigners names in the voters list, during the referendum, to ensure a strong majority of votes for the panchayat.

- E The intensity and levels of corruption within the bureaucracy and royal family.
The failure of the trade and transit negotiations with India, leading to stagnancy and hardship for the common people over an extended and uncertain period of time.

The government's neglect of the country's resources, especially exploitation of forest resources, causing environmental degradation.

The heavy reliance on foreign aid and expatriates for Nepal's development.

The polarization of Nepal's rich and poor, etc.

CRITICISM OF MEDIA

1. Capitalization of mainstream media and disregard for alternative media channels.

2. Serving the purpose of the urban elite population and sidetracking of basic issues, confronting the lives of the rural people that constitute 94% of the total population.

PARADOXES OF THE MEDIA DURING CRISIS: EXPERIENCES IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Tension between conflict and consensus:

Media, as a commercial product is, by its very nature, a system of institutionalized competition for power. Media runs the risk of becoming too intense and conflict ridden, so that political stability is jeopardized.

Representativeness against governability:

Mainstream media, during crisis period, is unwilling to concentrate information power in the hands of many. This subjects media professionals to find mechanisms of popular representation and accountability. Media requires "energy"
during crisis, to sustain itself and to act quickly and
decisively. Representativeness requires that media speak to
and for these conflicting interests: governability requires
that party affiliations of media practitioners, have sufficient
autonomy to rise above yet remain within the narrow
prescription of party politics.

Consent and effectiveness:

Democracy means, literally 'rule by the people, or rule with
the consent of the people. To be stable, it requires popular
legitimacy, moral commitment and emotional allegiance. If
media is to be valued, it must seek the consent of the
people and yet maintain effectiveness through a system of
order and justice. Given the need to accommodate the extent
of diversities based on ethnicity, culture, language,
geography and natural resources endowment, these paradoxes
have important implications for the media and democracy.

In Nepal, after one year of the functioning of a democratic
system, these paradoxes are still being questioned. For
example the Independent (March 1991) questions this
dilemma:

"Are we sliding down the slippery slope toward a media
dictatorship". The writer, a journalist himself of many years
of experience, continues -

"What is most galling is that the government today not only
continues to control radio as zealously as the hey day of
panchayat rule, but that suggestions to open this channel of
communication to all, are summarily dismissed as heretical"

This however, is not a new phenomenon. During the national
referendum of 1983, Radio Nepal was unable to demonstrate
even the slightest degree of distance from its political
masters. The radio is Nepal holds the highest 'carrying
capacity' in terms of spatial information spread, reaching
out to the grassroots in remote villages, in the mountains,
hills and plains. The potentials of the radio on the one
hand, and the control by government in power on the other
further intensifies the paradoxes outlined above.

DIFFICULTIES IN ADOPTING WESTERN MODELS

The concept of "free flow of information" generating from
pressures in the West to adopt this form of economic system,
marginalizes the East in a world controlled, driven and
shaped by the "information technology - rich" countries. So
that the concept of this "free flow" only ensures a rich
supply of information from the South, to feed the high-tech information demands and absorptive capacities of the information industry of the North.

The primacy of "right to information" should question "whose rights to information* We should stop blaming the large masses of the rural poor for their "ignorance", and respect the indigenous "knowledge" that they possess. So that developing a code of ethics for media professionals should reflect the responses of the "uneducated" masses and educate them towards exercising and articulating their responses within their framework of needs and options.

The urban elitist concept of information dissemination relies heavily on Western models and high tech, in which almost "marketing to death" objections need to be met. A code of ethics that raises consciousness for "rural development" devoid of narrow party ideologies, is perhaps one way of defusing intense politicization of events that ignite passions in the South Asian socio-political arena, to serve information and power hungry politicians.

The paradigm of the North/South divide in terms of information flow, generation and capitalization through technology, applied in the context of urban/rural dichotomies is South Asia, provides further insight into the paradoxes of media and crises, and calls for rational use of media technology despite its great attractiveness.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The ambivalent impact of media on people's minds raises issues of ethics. For example, the sudden and overwhelming availability of information, both visual and/or audio, brought the Gulf War front to the majority of urban households in Nepal. The radio, which has the most extensive network, reaching almost all corners of the kingdom, transmitted day to day events, such as the extent of violence and deaths through national the news agency BBC, Voice of America, All India Radio, etc. The sudden presence of CNN (Cable News Network) and its visual relay of the war in minute precision, generated almost anti-US feelings amongst Nepalese viewers. Continuous shots of Baghdad city being bombed and of women and children in hiding under duress, raised sympathy for "the underdog", Saddam Hussein. This differed from the western perception of CNN coverage of the war. Western viewers perceived the coalitions involvement in Iraq, as a historic move for world security and justice.
In this context, it may be said that the CNN coverage of the war created a 'psychological flux' in Nepal. Intensive arguments both for the against the coalition were raised. This indicates the power of media technology, the power and influence of information, the perception of viewers and their value judgements and the accountability of the media.

GUIDELINES:

(i) Journalist's organizations and cooperation

- In Nepal, the level of organization and media participation or associations, appears very weak. Professionals in the media world are few and have yet to make their presence readily felt. Media professionals have yet to take up basic issues and problems, through investigative journalism and reporting.

Government is still the major employer of media professionals, a factor which has far-reaching influences on journalist's willingness to stand up for professional ethics and to defend their working conditions. It would be unrealistic to assume or suggest that all media professionals should turn their efforts to unity at this stage. However, united action around the issue of common concern should be encouraged.

(ii) Accountability

- 'Accountability to readership' of those working in various media organizations, is not adequate. The assumption that particular organizations represent the people, needs to be carefully examined. In Nepal for example, media people have usually been responsible to the government and the ruling party.

The possibility of setting up boards of trustees or directors, representative if society, could facilitate the exercise of accountability, though this should not effect day to day editorial decisions; but should ensure that the media adheres to the principle of accountability.

(iii) Exercise of power within the media

- The media world functions with its own structures of power and decision making. Editors function quite independently of journalists, on deciding the
content and editorial policy of their organs. Editors need to participate much more in the process of news gathering and verification of news, and journalists, in editorial policy decisions.

Newsrooms should not be concerned only with sensationalism in reporting, but should aim at being microcosms of the society, that people are trying to build. The accessibility of news or information to people means accessibility to the newsroom, so that the media provides an arena of intellectual struggle for the masses.

Language and widening of access of democratic press

If people have a right to information then information should be available to people in the language they speak and understand best. In Nepal during the panchayat rule, the media found expression only in English and Nepali. Though it was genuinely felt that other native languages should find their rightful place in the media, this was never realized. Over the past one year since democracy, the media has positively encompassed the major languages of Nepal. For example, Hindi and Maithali in the Tarai plains, and Newari in Kathmandu valley. Where there is a large variety of languages, however, the economies of cost can be lost.

Funding

A guide to funding organizations and how to use those organizations could be produced. A 'media bank' from which independent nonpartisan media professionals and donor agencies could contribute, in generating, as well as utilizing information is suggested. This would ensure against duplication of efforts, and in making media transactions more efficient and cost effective.

There were grave doubts being raised in Nepal, during the crisis, about alliances being formed between donor agencies and political parties. Media reportage, for example, has been highlighting large funding disbursements to the major political parties that contested the recent elections in Nepal. DANIDA, as reported, was the largest funder for Nepal's elections. The public does not know
whether this indicates partisan inclinations or nonpartisan administrative and procedural support. The United States has been accused of supporting both the Communist Parties and the Nepali Congress, the leading rival parties in the elections.

This has left the public to wonder about the role of donor agencies in terms of developmental support versus political support for "development", which raises the issue of donor's social accountability to the country, to which they are "developmentally" committed.

(vi) Training

- A media training center should be set up in the region to disseminate facilities that are currently available.

- Regional media training networks should be set up for short term training exchange programs, and long term establishment of a regional media school.

(vii) Distribution

- Media organizations in Nepal rely heavily on amateur distribution networks. They should follow an aggressive distribution policy where subscriptions alone are not a criteria. For considerations of profitability could well wipe out the right of poor people to information.

(viii) Regional information networks and projects

- The SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries need more information from the subcontinent from a democratic perspective.

- There is need for improved communication and for interregional networks. The SAVE project of SAARC should become more dynamic and research oriented, in order to develop an implementation and media strategy.
The small national newspapers in the region could use more regional news, if they received it.

Mechanisms for regional cooperation

There should be an assessment of the achievements arising from this gathering and a review of the need for a broader consultation of this sort. Any such future conference should be planned in consultation and cooperation with journalist organizations and media institutions.

Accountability to future generations

Need for alternative media and reporting with ecologically conscious messages that reflect sustainable lifestyles and values.

Expanded documentaries and investigative reports to sensitize the public about ecological challenges.

Development of interactive television and radio forums that demonstrate conflict resolution skills.

Given the awesome power of some media channels such as television, the impact of these would be rapid and dramatic, in achieving the shared understanding and social consciousness needed to move towards a more workable and satisfying future.

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P Thacker is President of Centre for Women and Development, Kathmandu. Co-ordinator: Communication Education and Management Training.