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Role Of Mass Media In A National Crisis

By

Miskeen Ali Hajiazi
ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN A NATIONAL CRISIS

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The fourth estate, which includes the electronic media in the present communications age, is one of the main sources influencing human affairs, political, economic and social. Socio-psychological waves caused by involvement of human groups in ethno-religious situations lead to tensions posing serious challenges to the society as a whole. Even a stable society cannot escape the disturbing turbulence of crisis conditions that can threaten the established social or political order. While the legislature, the judiciary and the executive are expected to take up the task of maintaining a proper law and order climate, it is the media which have to play the main role in presenting a factually accurate and objective account of the day-to-day situation in a democratic dispensation because they are the vital components of the vehicle of mass communication that commands a vast sweep by reaching maximum number of people in minimum time, making it the most effective mechanism for dissemination of correct information and influencing the interpretation of events. This is the process which educates and guides the people and paves the way for the formation of a healthy public opinion.

The tremendous scope of the media in the formation of public opinion on current affairs entrusts the fourth estate with an equally onerous responsibility. As was said by the Quaid "The press can do a great damage to a society through wrong projection but it can render a great service to it by providing correct guidance to the people and its government".

* Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Founder of Pakistan
The role of the mass media in a national crisis needs to be examined keeping in view the status of the media and the nature of the crisis. Only the independent media are supposed to act as the 'watch dogs'. The media under government control, perhaps, only work as organs of publicity and propaganda. If the 'CRISIS' is the natural or inevitable result of a peculiar situation, the role of the media would be different from their role in a crisis created by the wrong policies or misdeeds of those who are at the helm of affairs. Thus 'crisis' may differ from place to place. Similarly the role of the media may also differ from place to place and from time to time.

PERPETUAL CRISIS SITUATIONS

Many of the Third World developing countries like Pakistan do not face a crisis only sometimes. They are always in a state of crisis. With limited resources and ever-increasing population pressure they cannot move fast towards the goal of progress and prosperity.

Achieving independence after long struggles, exposure to information and knowledge as well as awareness, brought about by the mass media, have raised the hopes and aspirations of the masses. In many cases development is not compatible with the rising expectations. Consequently, frustration and a sense of deprivation are manifest in many ways. This situation is often exploited by clever politicians, adventurers, opportunists, and slogan-mongers. The result is agitation, strikes and destruction, which further aggravate the economic, social and political situation. If the mass media do not behave
in a positive manner and become tools of propaganda in the hands of vested interests or they just mirror the situation and magnify it, the crisis deepens and the nation finds itself in a vicious circle.

EXPECTATIONS FROM THE MEDIA

The media in these countries are, therefore, expected to exercise extra care so as not to behave in a manner likely to aggravate a crisis, whether it be political, economic or social. A selfish or unwise move on the part of the media worsens the situation.

In the context of most of the Third World countries, by the media we mean the print medium. The electronic media have always been under the government control and hence they do not play their role independently. Besides providing entertainment, they have never risen above the level of official propaganda machines. Since the press and the nation rise and fall together, the mass media in the Third World countries share the achievements and failures, smooth sailing and turbulences.

CASE OF PAKISTAN

Pakistan was born in a crisis. It not only faced grave dangers to its existence but also confronted stupendous administrative, economic and infrastructural problems. Millions of refugees poured in and posed added problems of food, shelter and resettlement. The resources were almost non-existent. The new-born country comprised mostly backward areas. Only nineteen out of 152 towns with 50,000 plus population were
located in Pakistan. These were almost agricultural towns. In fact there was nothing except the will to live. The mass media shared this backwardness of the nation. At the dawn of independence there were only two small radio stations, Lahore (5 Kw.) and Peshawar (10 Kw.), each having a range of 40 miles and both covering only 6% area of the country. Television made its advent 18 year later.

Before independence, 556 newspapers and periodicals appeared from the areas comprising Pakistan. About 70% of them and certainly well-established were either closed or transferred to India. The result was a big vacuum.

Despite being weak in material resources and intellectual and professional abilities, the mass media played a commendably constructive role and guided the nation in successfully grappling with many crisis in the early years of the country's life. They boosted the morale of the uprooted millions, fostered unity among the people and inspired them to work selflessly to put the new country on strong economic footings.

Imposition of martial law in 1958 marked an ominous beginning for the Media and Democracy in the country. The PPL (Progressive Paper Ltd.) which published The Pakistan Times, Imroze and weekly Lail-o-Nahar), was taken over by the government. In 1961 the APP, the major news agency, was also brought under government control through an ordinance. The year 1963 witnessed the promulgation of the Press and Publications Ordinance. Termed as black law by the Journalists. The formation of National Press Trust in 1964 was another step towards strengthening the hold of the government over the print medium. Television made its advent in 1964.
and it was given under the control of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

The history of the mass media in Pakistan from the year 1958 to date presents strange and contradictory aspects. The mass media achieved unprecedented development. Both P.B.C. (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation) and PTC (Pakistan Television Corporation) expanded fast. The print medium made a great leap forward in technology. The adoption of new compsoing and printing methods resulted in better production. Circulation increased many times. There was a constant rise in the revenues. Major newspapers flourished, because chairs and big empires. The Urdu Press, specially, had unprecedented development. New types of journalism, i.e. digest journalism and professional journalism made their mark. The regional press also took leaps forward. Radio and Television started commercial services, set up new stations and boosters or relay stations, and increased the transmission timings. The annulment of P.P.O. in 1988 has paved the way for further growth of the press. There is mushroom growth of new daily papers and periodicals. Some good new newspapers, both Urdu and English, have appeared. All this development is unprecedented. But one is pained to see that the mass media could not play their role in the crisis the nation faced during the past two/three decades, the period of the rapid development of the media.

In Pakistan the radio (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation) and T.V. (Pakistan Television Corporation) have been and are under government control. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting exercises control over the electronic media. These media are considered mostly entertaining media. They provide education and information and have played a very important role in the development of the country. So far, Radio is the only medium which reaches the entire population. Television is mostly an urban medium so far. The high
rate of illiteracy (74%) limits the effects of the print medium. The electronic media generally lack credibility as far as news and comments are concerned. Both these media, to a great extent, reflect the official viewpoint. They often remain under criticism from the opposition. Whenever there is a crisis, the people turn to the independent newspapers or foreign broadcasting services for 'true' news.

The role of the press during Martial Laws needs special mention. It was the press which struggled for the restoration of democracy in the country. Though the political parties were termed as defunct and their leaders as so and so of the defunct party, they were kept in the headlines by the newspapers. Nevertheless its failures are greater than its achievements. This opinion is substantiated by the following words of one expert:

"The press was much more independent during the first eleven years of Pakistan than it has ever been since, and it will be after considerable experience in democracy that the press will be able to resume the independence which it displayed in the beginning. The trouble lies both in the controls exercised either openly or secretly by government and in the lack of maturity of the press itself".

FAILURES OF MASS MEDIA

There are many instances of the failure of leadership and the press in Pakistan to face the challenge, perhaps because of protracted military rule or perhaps due to failure to build democracy on sound foundation which dealt a deadly blow to the established principles of democracy representation.

Press in Chains - Zamir Niazi pp. 75
How did the press react when some army commanders masterminded a 'take over' from President Ayub Khan who said in his 'final statement':
'I do not want to preside over the liquidation of the country'. General Yahya's conduct of the affairs of Pakistan was most inept, and this folly resulted in a great debacle for the country. Obviously it was due to intrigues, power-hungry leadership, and deceptive role of the press.

The 1970 elections confronted the country with a big crisis. There was a conflict between the two winning parties which caused fatal polarization. The press utterly failed to provide correct and timely guidance during this crisis. Some newspapers aligned themselves with the conflicting parties and groups. The media failed to project the facts and to analyse the situation in a detached manner. Some papers played as tools of propaganda in the hands of political opportunists and foreign inspired activists.
How did the media behave when the government took over banks, industries and educational institutions in 1972? The established economic institutions were subjected to a new system without proper homework and advance planning. This system has collapsed everywhere during the past few years. A country cannot be run in such a slipshod fashion. The press did not have the guts to rise to the occasion and raise even its little finger against such obtrusions. The press only wagged its tail like a faithful pet.

The sudden switch-over to an authoritarian system not suiting our condition and the failure of the press to check it went a long way in creating a near-chaos and aggravating the economic crisis in Pakistan.

The process of rectification started sometime in the eighties but the signs of recovery from trauma are not clearly visible. The disastrous effects of nationalization, long-over, still persist in shaking the national economy. Not only that, denationalization could provide welcome relief in the tense economic situation but, strangely enough, the working classes of all the groups oppose it not because it has done any good to our financial position but because it has enabled the unions to dictate terms to the administration, dominate decision-making at virtually all levels, and encourage indiscipline causing systematic degeneration in all spheres.

The press did little to warn the nation about the catastrophe that would create such conditions in the country.

During the 1990 Election campaign, the coverage of the event in the news as well as in the views columns was not objective. The coverage did not mirror the situation as it was. On the one hand, the NPT newspapers concentrated
on projecting the point of view of the LII or the Government, while on the other, the PPP organ Musawat and some independent newspapers polarised the situation, suiting to the interests of the opposite party. These papers did not take special measures to sift the news from the views. Their predictions vis-a-vis election results turned out to be misleading.

AFGHAN CRISIS

The armed intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was a threat to Pakistan's integrity. Pakistan was opposed to a super power's occupation of a small country with its military might. This amounted to encouraging other big countries to occupy their small neighbours.

The odds were many. Soviet threats could not be taken as mere bluffs. The Soviets could encourage or lure other countries to launch aggression against Pakistan or compel the puppet Afghan Government to invade Pakistan. Pakistan provided shelter to 3 million Afghan refugees. Under the circumstances there was no option for Pakistan. On the whole, the media supported the nation's stand but a section of the Pakistani press, particularly the English Press, could not come up to the expectations of the nation. Some newspapers constantly opposed and criticised the government stand. The Mujahideen were painted as fugitives or smugglers of arms and drugs. The refugees were severely criticised. These newspapers urged for a change in the policy on Afghanistan. They demoralised the readers by magnifying Russian might and acting as conveyers of threats. They tried to give the impression that the government of Pakistan
was unnecessarily inviting Russian wrath by supporting what they described as Afghan rebels. Some Pakistani politicians also vehemently opposed Pakistan's stand on Afghanistan and a section of the press acted as spokesman of the government in Afghanistan.

GULF CRISIS

The press could not play a balanced and responsible role in the gulf crisis. Opposition parties and some allies in the coalition government wrongly played upon the religious sentiments of the people and managed an agitation which was projected by the press in a very sensational manner. With the exception of a few newspapers to a certain extent all independent newspapers tilted the news to indicate as if Iraq would, in the long run, rout the Allied forces. They even manipulated news and pictures to establish that Sodam was a champion of Palestine cause, a Hero of Islam. The Iraqi stand was termed as Jihad against Israel and criticism of allied powers became a fashion, creating a climate super charged with unjustified sentimentalism in a society of very limited literacy.

The government came under tremendous pressure of misguided public opinion. Except two or three national newspapers and a few journals all the newspapers behaved irresponsibly in this crisis. In the closing days of the war the newspapers contradicted what they had published earlier. A few examples of this irresponsible journalism are the headlines attached herewith (Annexure-A). Had the government yielded to this pressure, the country would have lost dependable friends.
During the Gulf War some political/religious leaders behaved irresponsibly but how can the press as an institution, with a fair command of facts, afford to choose a thoroughly and fundamentally wrong course. According to an analyst*

"Pakistan's first casualty in the Gulf War was the integrity of its journalists. Newspaper editors knowingly published exaggerated, often false, claims made by Baghdad Radio, Iraq News Agency and the Iraqi Embassy in Islamabad. Fundamentalist agit-prop occupied a prominent place in the vernacular press. The vernacular Urdu press, which caters to the vast conservative lower middle classes, then consciously began to indulge its religious beliefs and anti-American sentiments. The Gulf War was portrayed as a clash of civilizations - infidels vs believers."

The analyst has concluded that "press freedom has often bordered on press anarchy. In the absence of enforceable libel laws, cheeky reporters have got away with creating news and views rather than faithfully reporting them". *

One cannot plead for unjust or unfair treatment of news. But judgement in matters of display to various news developments and comments on them must follow the course of sane analysis. The Pakistan media subordinated the truth about the crisis in the region to an unjustifiable stand on Saddam's madness. This was an unpardonable lapse and the editors of the press and the official media should take a serious view of such a disappointing own nation. Truth should never be allowed to become a casualty.

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* Najaam Sethi - Pakistan's Free and Easy Press - The Friday Times, April 11-17, 1991
BAHAWALPUR TRAGEDY

The Bahawalpur tragedy is another instance. Pakistan's President and some top military leaders of the army were killed. It was not an accident. Like the killing of the country's first Prime Minister in Rawalpindi, this catastrophe also failed to arouse the instinct of the press to play its due part in unveiling the secrets of the disaster. How the press was managed by the interested powers, only time will tell.

If Bofers Scandal in India can bring about the downfall of government, if the scandal of breaking into American Democratic party office in 1972 can force President Nixon out of office, why should Pakistani press fail to raise even a ripple in the politics of the country. They are expected to be in the know of things. They are expected to have behind the-scene information on major issues facing the country. They must not prefer silence if they are in possession of facts about a developing challenge to the vital interest of the country.

The press has also not behaved correctly in many other situations. For example, it has been playing up the utterances of self-styled leaders and politicians regarding ethnic, linguistic and political differences. Even utterances against the integrity and existence of the country were unnecessarily highlighted by the newspapers. The preachers of parochialism were given undue importance. Many such slogan-mongers had and have little or no following. But the press projected them out of proportion. This treatment by the newspapers has, more often than not, laid the foundation for a politically explosive situation.

Some of the headlines in Pakistan press during the recent past are examples of outstanding travesty of truth. These headlines adorn concocted and fabricated stories from some specialists in political mischief.
Some of the so many headlines are given below to substantiate the point:

"The Muhajirs living in Punjab should be ready for departure"
"Five Million Punjabis living in Sind are coming to Punjab"
"Plot for destruction on P.M.'s arrival in Lahore"
"Junejo and Benazir unacceptable to Army"
"Bohawalpur crash- several arrested including Sq. leader"
"Clash of Jamali and Bhutto tribes"
"Fight between groups in KARACHI"
"Caretaker Government responsible for bloodshed"
"I am opposed to Pakistan"
"Call for Independent Sind" (Annexure-B)

These utterances created a climate of uncertainty and tension in the country which affected investment, economic development and social harmony and deepened the crisis.

In Pakistan a crisis situation in reference to the nationalities concept existed sometime in the past because due to linguistic differences the country did not appear to be a homogenous whole to some people. Who can see homogeneity even in wholly heterogeneous areas outside their own borders? There is clear from homogeneity in all other respects and the country has, due to its inherent potential of indivisibility, over the years, become a solid whole form which all the component parts are deriving more economic, social and political benefits and is making much greater industrial and agricultural progress than could be possible in small sovereign states. However, some political figures, for selfish reasons or due to prompting from foreign bodies, sing the separate nationality tune.
These people had little or no following, but the press made them into tigers made of paper. It is understandable to accommodate different viewpoints to a reasonable extent out of respect for the pious principles of freedom of thought, but to go out of the way to seek interviews of anti-national elements does not befit the newspapers which are proud of their passion for patriotism and national integrity. A better course of action to gain larger circulations is to encourage investigative reporting of important social and economic issues, provide full and objective coverage to public dealings by government officials at various levels, and arrange extensive journalistic attention to the problems of backward areas.

The recent agreements between the provinces on the apportionment of river water for irrigation and Federal funds are yet another case in point. The water dispute could not be resolved during the past 43 years of our existence because misrepresentation of facts by provinces through the media had given rise to a continuing crisis. Had the present Prime Minister and the provincial Chief Ministers not made an earnest and determined effort to resolve the difficult issue, many national development plans would have gone by default, upset all development priorities.

The efforts for consensus on the issues was very wisely not made public; for things would have come to naught if some newspapers had got wind of what was on the anvil and had published reports about them which surely would have invited a spate of adverse comments by self-styled leaders who flourish in crisis situations. Journalistic ethics dictate caution and restraint when national interests are at stake.

Few examples of responsible journalism

We have a few example of *The Pakistan Times* which in spite of being under NPT tried to interpret repeated U.S. offers of separate aid to eastern wing of the country before the dismemberment crisis. This caused a storm but the effort did not produce the desired effect because of the apathy of a large
section of the media and the political leaders who were guided by selfish motives.

There is another instance in which the media was equal to the task when in 1981 a PIA plane was hijacked. The response reflected a sense of responsibility which should have always been the watchword of the custodians of national interests. On the whole the Press indulged sensationalism.

In the words of a columnist of an English weekly:

"Judging from the established code of ethics for journalists, most of the newspapers in Pakistan are not adhering to the valued norms of objectivity. They do not give much emphasis to projecting the other side of the picture of a particular situation. Things have come to such a pass that reporters deliberately twist the news and inject their own opinion in the news to make it interesting and startling. Apart from this, some newspaper editors ask their reporters to opinionate the news and term this mode of giving a slant to news as news analysis, commentary and interpretation of the even or the situation."

The blatant violation of the norms of objectivity becomes more vivid during a crisis.

"Our press has yet to mature to provide the necessary information to the public so that they can make their own assessments. Some parts of our press are simply nothing but sensationalism and is hardly press in the real sense of the word."

Whatever the reasons the greatest weakness of the mass media in Pakistan is their dependence on foreign channels for news and views.

The major news-feeding sources are:

1. Foreign news agencies.

2. Two national news agencies, one of which is under government control.

3. International broadcasting systems which are frequently credited and quoted by the press in Pakistan. Not a single media organization of Pakistan had its correspondent in Baghdad, Kuwait or Riyadh during the Gulf crisis. The coverage of Gulf war was totally dependent on foreign news channels.

The result is that sometimes concocted, unverified, and misleading stories are published.

Since the editorial comments, opinionated columns and topical articles are based on these unverified news, they too are sometimes misleading and below standard.

As regards comments and articles, Pakistani newspapers mostly depend on the staff writers. They do not hire outside experts and specialists in the various fields. One obvious reason is that the newspapers do not pay handsomely to the experts. The staff writers write too much and too often; they write hurriedly and in many cases without sorting the facts and properly analysing the same.
In the end I would summarise as follows:

1. The independent media can play a more effective role in a crisis situation. But in certain situations, the media under government control can play a more constructive role; as it happened in the case of Pakistan during the Gulf War.

2. The media practitioners in the Third World countries, particularly those in the print media, need orientation with regard to national interests, ethics of journalism, and the objectives of the fourth estate.

3. The media organizations in the developing countries should have their own channels of gathering information. Their dependence on foreign channels should be eliminated or reduced to a minimum.

4. The electronic media should be made as much credible as possible.

5. The news based on utterances dominate the mass media in Pakistan. Sometimes the ratio of such news is more than 90%. The utterances of so many leaders of so many political parties, some opposed to each other, create confusion and worsen the crisis situation. Objective investigative reporting can rectify this situation to a considerable extent.

6. The investigative stories mostly are one-sided, slanted and even concocted. The associations of Editors and Reporters should themselves emphasize norms of objectivity.

7. The media, particularly the newspapers, must hire outside experts and specialists and provide relief to their overburdened staff writers.

8. There should be periodic workshops, seminars/symposia on "Standards of Reporting, Opinion Writing, Observance of the Code of Ethics, Norms of Objectivity, and Other Related Items."
NOTES

1. Ahmad Ali Khan - Journalism Then and Now Dawn Jan 24, 1988
2. Zamir Niazi - What the Press has endured Dawn Jan 24, 1988
3. Ten years of Pakistan 1947-57 (Karachi Pakistan Publications) 1957
6. Najam Sethi - Pakistan’s Free and Easy Press April 11-17, 1991