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The journalist and the beast (or is the journalist the beast?)

Media Matters

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Ask anyone what they think the major problems in society are, and chances that the media will figure somewhere in the answer. Ask about possible solutions and the answer again will include the media in some way.

So is the media part of the solution or part of the problem? Or is it, as some think, the problem itself?

Do journalists simply mirror society – reflect the good and the bad -- or do they actually shape perceptions and agendas?

Equally crucially, do they act independently or do they ‘manufacture consent’ for their governments and corporate owners?

Have the media contributed to rising tensions between South Asia’s nuclear-armed neighbours, or are hostilities between the countries contributing to tensions between their media?

Has the media boom brought people closer, or is it driving a greater wedge between them?

The answer is ‘yes’, to all these questions.

The ‘media’ of course are not a monolithic entity. The news media includes print, television, radio and more recently the ‘new media’ – websites and web logs or ‘blogs’ posted on the

Internet. The 'popular' or 'entertainment' media includes film and advertising. Crucial to the role of the media is the continual blurring of the line between the news and entertainment media.

The media boom has on the one hand brought the people of India and Pakistan closer together and contributed to shattering stereotypes. On the other hand, it has done just the opposite, reconfirming prejudices and old suspicions.

The 24/7 news media boom has also spawned a beast that thrives on 30-second sound bites and shrinking attention spans around the world. It is not big on in-depth analysis and prefers speculation. It tends to bypass contextualisation for quick updates. The race to be the first to 'break' the news often leads to misreporting and inaccuracy. Peace talks and negotiations which would be more effective away from the media spotlight are routinely sabotaged by leaks and overreactions to those leaks.

Broadcasting belligerent statements by one politician or other is damaging anyway, but worse when these are cross-border taunts and challenges. The media has a duty to report, but giving weight to negative statements and events contributes to the hardening of stances and reinforcing of negative stereotypes. Of course, it also exposes the belligerent nature of those making such statements for all to see.

Bridging the divide:

Conversely, the media has contributed to bringing people closer. Indian peace groups who visit Pakistan, or Pakistani groups visiting India, get a great deal of media attention. Since the media now includes television, even those who can't read newspapers learn of these efforts no matter if the information provided is sometimes inadequate or negatively slanted. On another level, the hunger of the public for good entertainment overrides all tensions. A few years ago, Geo TV co-produced a musical show from Dubai called '*Gaye Gi Dunya Geet Merey*'. With an Indian host and director, this was the channel's most popular programme bringing in the highest advertising. The channel also began broadcasting Indian films before the official ban on Indian films in the cinema houses was lifted.

But for nearly fifty years, there was barely any contact between the media of both countries. After the 1965 war, barely 20 years after Partition, we stopped reporting for or writing in each other's newspapers. Our publications and films were banned in each other's countries – a ban now made irrelevant by technology. The advent of the VCR in the 1980s enabled Indians to watch Pakistani television dramas while Indian movies were the entertainment of choice on this side of the border. Later of course, DVD players and the Internet rendered the bans even more irrelevant.

There were sporadic attempts to bridge the divide in the pre-Internet days. In April 1984, the English language daily *The Muslim* (now defunct) invited several eminent Indian journalists and intellectuals to Islamabad for a conference with Pakistani journalists, politicians and retired civil and military officials. 'The rights and wrongs in the India-Pakistan relationship were aired by both sides with great frankness and candour. The contacts established between peace seeking Pakistanis and Indians during this conference were to go a long way in making joint efforts for peace in the following years,' recalled Dr Mubashir Hasan at a talk New Delhi in 2003¹.

A decade later, another English language daily, *The Frontier Post*, edited by Khaled Ahmed, hosted a series of similar meetings in Lahore. Several prominent Indian intellectuals, lawyers and journalists attended these meetings. Sometimes journalists made links at regional networks, like the South Asian Media Association (SAMA) formed in Colombo in 1991 which regularly brought together journalists from around the region for some years.

However, it was not until 1995 that Indian and Pakistani journalists began writing regularly for each other's publications, after some of us met at a convention of the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) in New Delhi. PIPFPD spawned other initiatives, most notably the South Asia Free Media Association in 2000, formed after the women's peace bus led by Nirmala Deshpande from India came to Pakistan at the invitation of Asma Jahangir in Lahore.

Since 1997, Panos South Asia, a media organisation headquartered in Kathmandu has also built bridges between journalists, including a series of retreats for Indian and Pakistani media 'gatekeepers'. More recently, in January 2008 and January 2009, Panos hosted two groundbreaking workshops in Kathmandu for Kashmiri journalists across the divide. When the Indian journalists left, the Pakistanis went to the airport to see them off, perhaps a first at any seminar, and there were tearful goodbyes.

Despite all these connections formed over the years, when a major act of violence takes place, nationalistic feelings prevail at least in the mainstream media. When the public in India or Pakistan is enraged at the other country, journalists and the news media they work for often show a tendency to reflect those sentiments rather than questioning them or attempting to calm things down.

Two major reasons behind this factor include the nature of the 24/7 news media beast (including its corporate, financial side) and secondly, the human beings behind the beast.

Feeding the 24/7 news media beast and the need to 'sell':

¹ 'Nikhil Chakravarty and the Momentum of Peace', Mubashir Hasan, keynote address at India International Centre, New Delhi, November 3, 2003.

In the scramble to improve TRPs – television rating points, based on which advertisements are given. When something major happens, the public seeks answers. The channels which keep viewers glued to the screens with a continuous virtual ‘reality show’ improve their TRPs. Even when nothing much is happening, TV channels try and provide that ‘entertainment’ by sensationalising in order to keep the viewers there. Sensation sells, so does speculation (filling our vicarious need for gossip). A hawkish guest is so much more exciting than a calm and reasonable speaker who is trying to examine more complex issues (doesn’t usually fit the 30-second sound bite either).

When there is no new footage available, keep repeating grainy shots of the horror captured on CCTV – looped in slow motion if there is little footage available. So ‘iconic’ images get etched into our minds – the horror of the airplanes heading inexorably towards the twin towers in New York, the attack on the Marriot Hotel in Lahore, gunmen in action in Mumbai and Lahore, a van running over a security guard before ramming into the gate he was guarding, to blow up the FIA building in Lahore.

No news is good news. In other words, good news rarely makes the news. To package information in an exciting way in order to attract attention, journalists often need to plug up bad news and downplay the good news. TV channels continuously showed the scene of the blasts that rocked the World Performing Arts Festival in Lahore on its second-last day, injuring two people. They did not give the artists who defied fear and went ahead on the last day the same kind of attention.

When Zardari was sworn in as President, a ‘breaking news’ ticker on one Pakistani channel read: “Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh congratulates Zardari”. This is hardly breaking news – but at least it was true. In the rush to be ‘the first’, channels often misreport.

The journalist:

Journalists are rightly held to a higher standard than those in other professions because our work impacts the public in a way that no other business does. Information is power. By providing information to the public, we have the potential to contribute to a democratic political process, to empower people.

There is no such thing as ‘objective’ journalism but at least we can aspire to be fair – to our ‘subjects’, to our audiences, and perhaps to our common humanity rather than national identities. But when their countries are under attack, many journalists find it difficult to step back and see the larger picture. Only when this fallibility is acknowledged can we move forward.

Journalists and producers are living breathing human beings, products of our societies. We belong to families that function around certain values, liberal and progressive or conservative and traditional – or perhaps a mixture of all these, leading to the bewildering contradictions evident in many of us. We have attended local schools and imbibed the warped messages in many of our textbooks (both in Pakistan and in India). We have watched movies and absorbed the ‘nationalistic’ subtext in Bollywood or Lollywood films. We have attended college, perhaps studied abroad and returned. For one reason or another, we joined the media rather than another profession. Some of us start to use our minds and rise above the nationalist mindset (leading us to be labelled periodically as anti-nationalist traitors) and the tit-for-tat one-upmanship that marks our countries’ relationship. Others struggle with the complexities. Still others don’t bother.

As the power and reach of the media grows, various vested interests who feel the need to control the information that reaches the public step up attempts to co-opt them, through fame, fortune, or fear. These vested interests range from corporations with economic interests to governments and intelligence or security agencies with political stakes. And when it comes to the ‘national interest’ or when the ‘homeland’ is under attack, many journalists need no prodding or incentives: ‘nationalism’ trumps responsible reporting.

Rising to the challenge:

All these factors combined - the demands of the 24/7 news media, the context of individual journalists, the prodding by vested interests -- can make for a lethal combination when there are acts of violence that threaten what Americans have neatly labelled as ‘homeland security’.

The terror attacks on Mumbai in November 2007 brought home the power – and the prejudice – of the media, particularly with regards to Pakistan-India relations. This was not a new phenomenon, nor was it restricted to India and Pakistan. American journalists fell into a similar nationalist trap after the event that quickly acquired the label of “9/11”. It was not “9/11” that changed the world but the response of the Bush administration to this audacious and horrific attack. And in this, the media helped him no end and must take responsibility – as some subsequently, much later did, did publically acknowledging the irresponsibility of their unquestioning over-reliance on the security establishment for information. They realized, only too late, that the security establishment, with its blinkered security paradigm – and links to the weapons manufacturers, who need to have hostile state and non-state actors to sell their wares to -- fed them false information that prepared the ground for the Iraq invasion and the Afghanistan bombing.

We continue to see similar patterns repeated in the context of Pakistan and India, where latent hostilities spring to the surface whenever the issue of 'nationalism' comes up. It was there when our countries tested nuclear weapons in 1998. Some journalists did question these tests, but were quickly labeled as unpatriotic or even anti-religion. There was little media coverage of the not inconsiderable protest demonstrations that took place in both countries against the tests. Demonstrations *for* the nuclear tests, however, were prominently covered. In Pakistan, some journalists even took the lead in physically attacking anti-nuclear activists at a press conference in Islamabad.

Talk show hosts routinely let hawkish talk go unchallenged. Soon after the Mumbai attacks, a retired army general referred to India as Pakistan's "dushman mulk" (enemy country). The host, perhaps swayed by the aggressive stance against Pakistan in the Indian media, let the term go unchallenged. Many here were so furious at the way some Indian TV channels responded to the Mumbai attacks that they felt it was justified for 'our' media to respond in kind. If one Indian channel ran the 'Pakistan factor' like a movie trailer, complete with sound effects and 'watch for the next episode' commentary, a Pakistani talk show host (with obvious links to the intelligence agencies) went on and on about the Mumbai attackers' Hindu and even Sikh identities. Neither has much credibility among the more educated, but both reach a wide mass audience that they regularly pump with their insidious views. Ironically, because neither side is aware of the credibility (or lack thereof) of the other side's equivalence of Fox News, even more responsible journalists play up these elements, pointing to the irresponsibility visible on the 'other' side.

Pakistani and Indian governments and/or politicians are so quick to blame the other country for any unrest or violence within their borders that these accusations have become routine and lose credibility. Yet many journalists unquestioningly accept the blame game. There may be some truth behind at least some of the finger pointing, but it is equally clear that without some level of disenchantment and alienation among locals due to the policies of their governments, the other country would not be able to exploit the situation. This holds as true for the Mumbai attacks as it does for attacks that have taken place in Pakistan, including the Lahore attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team.

Sometimes journalists are culpable more by omission than commission, ignoring or playing down certain aspects or not asking crucial questions. After the Mumbai attacks, as the sabre-rattling and war-mongering started again, former army generals known for their hawkish viewers had a field day hopping from one Pakistani TV channel to the other with veiled threats about the country's nuclear capability. I did not hear any of the anchors question them about the actual implications of this threat. Yet politicians and government officials often exhort Pakistani journalists to be more like their Indian counterparts in terms of being nationalistic and supporting government actions.

We are quick to blame the other country for its ill-treatment of our nationals, but we rarely take up the festering issue of prisoners incarcerated on both sides. The perception in Pakistan is that India mistreats ‘our’ prisoners a lot more than we do theirs. Such accusations from the other side receive no space in the media here. Few if any journalists investigate the cause of death of such prisoners. One young Indian fisherman Lakshman died in a Karachi jail last March apparently due to some stomach ailment. I don’t know if the Indian papers reported his death as being due to torture, but around the same time, the death of a young Pakistani prisoner Khalid Mehmood in an Indian prison made front page news here. Many journalists in their news reports accused India of torture. I don’t know of any who actually investigated the cause of death of either prisoner. We are all well aware of prison conditions and how the police treat prisoners in both countries. Sometimes a prisoner dies not due to outright torture but illness arising from neglect – poor living conditions in a hostile environment, extreme temperatures, lack of medical attention, all compounded by lack of contact with loved ones back home. This is taken so much for granted that it rarely figures in news reports.

When the Maharashtra government stopped two Pakistani artists from continuing their work in Mumbai after the November 2008 attacks, several TV reporters in Pakistan asked passers-by for their views. The answers were predictable: each ‘sound-bite’ condemned the action. Fair enough. However, the reporters did not ask what would have happened had the situation been reversed – would Indians working publically in Pakistan have been allowed to continue in the aftermath of a similar attack here in which the attackers had links with India?

Journalists may argue that they are just the messenger, reflecting official or public opinion. But they also have a responsibility to question and get people to think. The stakes are high in our nuclear-armed countries, in a post ‘9/11’ world where the major players include armed militants around the world who subscribe to the ideology of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

If we are to live in peace, journalists in both India and Pakistan need to examine their own failings rather than accusing the other side of not playing fair. We need to rise to the challenge of moving beyond personal and national affiliations to report honestly and impartially, keeping in mind all the complexities of a given situation. We need to focus on the processes behind the events, take a long view rather than hurried snapshots and sound-bites. Feed the beast junk food if we must, but also give it proper nutrition so that it grows and develops into a responsible all-rounder rather than the spoilt, stunted brat that it is becoming.

(ends)

Note: This essay includes comments and reporting from some of my earlier writings:

- ‘Post-Mumbai Journos Struggle Against Hostilities’, IPS, Dec 9, 2008 –

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45037>

- 'Media falls in the old trap', Dawn, Dec 3, 2008 <http://www.dawn.com/2008/12/03/op.htm#1>
- Media section of 'Democratisation in Pakistan', for South Asia Together Working Group Meetings (revised July 2006)
- 'Role of the Media in Conflict Generation & Conflict Transformation', presentation for WISCOMP, September 23, 2004
- 'Role of Women in Building Peace between India and Pakistan: A Pakistani perspective', in *Women Building Peace Between India and Pakistan*, ed. Shree Mulay and Jackie Kirk, Anthem Press (London, New York, Delhi), 2007