Chapter 36

MEDIA: NEW TRENDS, OLD PROBLEMS

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"The open secret of the electronic media, the decisive political factor, which has been waiting, suppressed or crippled for its moment to come, is their mobilizing power," observed Paul Marris and Sue Thornham in *Media Studies: A Reader* (2000). That was when the electronic media was the main contender for such moving and shaking. Since then, the Internet, cell phones and social media (like Facebook and Twitter) have made massive inroads into the public domain, impacting public discourse in an unprecedented manner. The merging of these technologies and tools – Internet, cell phones, video, audio, web logs ("blogs"), and social networks – has led to a virtual (no pun intended) revolution that would once have been considered science fiction. So much so that the UN has declared Internet access as an indispensible human right, terming it "an indispensible tool for realizing a range of human rights, combating inequality and accelerating development and human progress."

The nations that form South Asia, home to about a fifth of the world's population, have much to gain by cooperating to combat common problems like poverty, illiteracy and high fertility rates, unplanned urbanization, gender violence, child labor, poor health services and lack of clean drinking water. The biggest single factor hindering such cooperation is the relationship between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan. Their tensions dominate all regional gatherings, including summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

In this chapter I examine the media component of this problematic situation, focusing on efforts aimed at a better understanding across countries, including the media industry. Finally, I raise some questions regarding the future of a South Asian media amid a fast-changing global communications scene.

Regional Conflict and South Asian Media

The media's potential to fan as well as defuse tensions is well recognized. The high levels of illiteracy in much of the region lend radio and television more significance in terms of reaching the public than the print media or social media. But television

channels, driven by the race for "ratings," often sensationalize news and information that can fan conflict – supporting the argument that the ongoing ban on each other's television shows in India and Pakistan is just as well, given that their chauvinistic programs would only increase tensions. But the increasing penetration of the Internet is rendering this ban irrelevant. All the top television channels are now online: in the post-9/11 world with its changed security paradigms and stricter border controls, the media crosses borders via the World Wide Web. However, these same channels also provide space for peacemongers.

Of the several cross-border media initiatives across the region over the past couple of decades, the most visible is the groundbreaking Aman ki Asha (a combination of Urdu and Hindi words that mean "hope for peace"), launched on 1 January 2010, by the Jang Group and The Times of India Group, the two largest media companies of Pakistan and India respectively. Although both are widely perceived as being "hawkish," the stated aim of the initiative is to create an "enabling environment for both governments to dialogue on all outstanding issues" (www.amankiasha.com). The identical front-page editorial published in all editions of their morning dailies *The News*, *Jang* and *The Times of India* on 1 January 2010 was a historic first, followed by several Aman ki Asha events and campaigns around literature, music, poetry, economic collaboration, media, health and strategic issues. The major difference between this, and previous cross-border peace efforts, is its huge visibility, with two mainstream media houses approaching like a corporate campaign, complete with a logo, an "anthem," and advertising and editorial campaigns built around events.

Given the centrality of Indo–Pak relations in the dynamics of South Asia, as mentioned above, the success of any bilateral program for peace between India and Pakistan will benefit the entire region, particularly trade and economy.

Beyond the geographical subregion of the Indo–Gangetic Plain, with its shared language, heritage, music and food, India's entertainment industry ("Bollywood") cuts across regional boundaries, as do Pakistan's television drama serials and music to an extent. The 1990s spurt in the nongovernment environment and development sector included conferences that brought together environmentalists, human rights and gender activists, development workers and others, including Indian and Pakistan journalists. This, aided by the rise of the Internet, has facilitated cross-border contributions for each other's publications since the first Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy convention of 1995. Today, practically every major newspaper in India and Pakistan has regular stringers and contributors across the border.

A "Southasian" Media?

An early attempt to bridge the regional media divide was the South Asia Media Association (SAMA) formed in 1991, spearheaded by Javed Jabbar, a prominent writer, advertising executive and politician, from Pakistan. SAMA conducted training workshops for journalists and organized seminars on regional issues. Its media agenda for South Asia, presented to SAARC governments in 1996, was even reflected in the

SAARC information ministers' agreement of 1998. SAMA led to the formation of the South Asian Editors' Forum (SAEF) in November 1999, focusing on indigenous language newspapers that reach over 80 percent of the regional readership.

As SAMA's activities tapered off, the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) was formed in July 2000 at a South Asia media conference in Islamabad, barely a year after the "war-like situation" between India and Pakistan at Kargil. SAFMA founder Imtiaz Alam stressed the importance of "a regional body" for media professionals, although the conference was India/Pakistan-dominated in numbers and focus.

An ambitious attempt at regional journalism was South Asia Media Wise (SAMW) Online, which folded due to financial pressures (including bribery, the scourge of South Asia), despite an initial growth that resembled "a hockey stick on the graph" as its New York–based Pakistani founder Ibrahim Malick put it. Launched as a web portal on 1 May 2000, it obtained content from the independent South Asia Dispatch Agency (SADA), partly financed by venture capital, with its largest chunk of equity shares owned by journalists working there. SADA had a news exchange pact with the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS, formerly the India Abroad News Service), but tensions between India and Pakistan prevented joint marketing.

The Kathmandu-based *Himal Southasian*, launched by its editor Kanak Mani Dixit in 1996 with contributing editors in the South Asian capitals, has managed to struggle on over the years, thanks largely to grants and donations. *Himal* uses the term "Southasia" as one word in an effort "to restore some of the historical unity of our common living space – without wishing any violence on the existing nation states" and to inject "the aloof geographical term 'South Asia'… with some feeling." Himal organized the first competitive showcase of documentaries in the region: Film South Asia (FSA), a biennial festival in Kathmandu that has screened many films barred from the airwaves in their home countries. Responses to the films screened at FSA reinforce the sense that broadcasting them to larger audiences would substantially help to build bridges within the region.

India–Pakistan issues dominate regional information portals, like The South Asia Citizens Web (www.sacw.net, launched in 1996); The South Asian (www.thesouthasian. org/); and the South Asian Idea (www.thesouthasianidea.wordpress.com). The regional media organization Panos South Asia (http://www.panossouthasia.org/), launched in 1998 in Kathmandu has since 2002 included a series of Indo–Pak "media gatekeepers" meetings in its programming, in collaboration with *Himal Southasian*. The aim is to facilitate interaction and understanding between key players in Indian and Pakistani media.

During Aman ki Asha's "Talking Peace" editors' and anchors' conference in Karachi, April, 2010, Panos executive director A.S. Panneerselvan argued that these annual retreats have brought in "the question of Kashmir, not as a divisive issue but rather as a humanitarian crisis that the two countries need to address by keeping in mind the aspirations and political will of the people of Kashmir" (Panneerselvan 2010). He considers the increased contribution of Indians and Pakistanis in each other's media as

"a new equation," and "a brave act of subverting the illiberal visa regime of the two countries."

Besides *Himal Southasian*, a few other media companies across South Asia also openly campaign on various issues – like education, public transport and corruption – like the Bangla daily *Prothomo Alo*, Bangladesh, English magazines *Tehelka* and *Mid-Day*, and the Urdu daily *Siasat*, India, and Geo TV, Pakistan. However, Aman ki Asha, the "Hope for Peace" between India and Pakistan, is the first initiative in which media companies from two countries are working together for a cause. Feedback from polls conducted in both countries a year after the launch suggests that this movement has already yielded dividends in terms of improving Indians and Pakistanis' perceptions about each other.

Privatization and Beyond

If the last two decades were defined by satellite channels and media privatization, this is the digital age. Satellite television had already exposed audiences across the region to cross-border news and entertainment, and consumer trends. The greater openness pushed governments to pay at least lip service to media freedoms and freedom of information.

The global trend towards private media has been echoed in South Asia too, where multiple private television channels operate with greater influence than ever before. In fact, many media owners are in it not just for financial gain (many run into huge losses) but for the social status and political protection that media ownership can provide.

The private media in the region largely propagates the "national agendas" as defined by the security apparatus of their respective states – except in Bangladesh, which is not embroiled in any major external security conflict. The security establishment's attempts to control information, particularly in conflict zones, have not changed much over the years, from Kashmir to India's troubled northeast, Balochistan to Pakistan's northwest, or the Sri Lankan state's war against the Tamil Tigers to the Maoist conflict in Nepal. The corporate sector also increasingly influences the media. The increasing trends towards consumerism and the push for "ratings" were apparent even a decade ago, as Page and Crawley documented (2000). More recently they noted: "In the rapid expansion of TV in Pakistan, which now boasts some 70 channels, journalistic training and editorial control have taken second place to commercial considerations. In many parts of the country, even in dangerous areas like Swat, news is often being provided to channels by young people with minimal training, inadequate contracts or no insurance" (Page and Crawley 2009).

The number of these young people is escalating. They are joining television broadcasting seemingly in droves, often without prior journalism experience. Many become overnight stars. In Pakistan, the number of journalists shot up from 2,000 in 2002 to 17,000 in 2010 while the average age of a reporter dropped from 47 to 23. As Adnan Rehmat, former executive director of Intermedia put it, "The lack of experience and increased competition ensures that the emphasis is not on investigation but on sensation and more opinion than fact" (Nakamura 2010).

Such trends make journalists in South Asia increasingly vulnerable to violence, kidnapping and murder. While individual reporters in smaller cities or in remote rural areas are more likely to be attacked if they step on powerful toes, journalists in big cities for major media companies are also targeted and killed, most notably in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In 2012, Pakistan was ranked as the world's deadliest country for journalists for the second year running, according to Reporters without Borders (2011–12 Press Freedom Index). "There simply has been no one found guilty in any of the targeted or indirect killings of journalists in the past 10 years," comments Bob Dietz of the Committee to Protect Journalists ((CPJ) (2013). In conflict situations, journalists are caught between security forces and nonstate militant actors, both of which try to prevent information from reaching the public, as the murder of investigative journalist Saleem Shehzad exemplified.

The proliferation of the Internet, the rise of the social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, and camera-equipped, Internet-accessible cell phones and the marriage of these technologies, means that when information does emerge, it quickly goes "viral." Eyewitness accounts, photographs or video (often taken with cell phones) are uploaded instantly to blogs, Facebook and Twitter. This trend was dramatically evident in recent happenings in the Middle East. Major television networks like CNN and Al Jazeera highlighted tweets from the ground in Tahrir Square, besides interviewing "tweeps," as twitter users are called, providing viewers insights into the thinking of ordinary Egyptians.

Shoaib Athar (@reallyvirtual), an IT consultant in Abbottabad, Pakistan, tweeted real-time information about the US raid targeting the Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, without realizing until much later the news-worthiness of his posts, starting with "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1:00 a.m. (is a rare event)," and ending with "Uh oh, now I'm the guy who live-blogged the Osama raid without knowing it."

Sri Lanka, with one of the highest Internet penetrations in the region, is where the Internet and mobile telephone revolution has had the "largest impact after Burma," with publications like the web-based Groundviews.org helping to further public discourse on democracy and pluralism, notes the media analyst A. S. Panneerselvan (2011).

In Pakistan, videos of army officers beating or executing suspected militants and Taliban flogging a woman made the rounds via cell phone and Internet before TV channels picked them up. The mainstream channels' broadcast of the "Swat flogging video" was a decisive factor in swinging public opinion in favor of the army's operation against militants. Channels are more circumspect about broadcasting videos that expose atrocities by soldiers but the circulation of such footage at least pushes the army into initiating inquiries – even if the results rarely reach the public. Videos apparently showing abuse by security forces against youth in Indian-administered Kashmir also testify to the increasing difficulty in hushing up unpleasant truths. Although police investigation into the Kashmir videos focused on the possibility of fraud, the fact that they took notice at all speaks for the impact of what can be termed the "paramedia" – a term coined by Bangladeshi journalist Afsan Chowdhury (2007), for the underground media of the 1990s.

Imagine if this technology had been around in the 1960s and during the 1971 war between then East and West Pakistan. Barred from addressing the discontent in East Pakistan, the Pakistani media presented the West Pakistan's military invasion of the eastern wing as a legitimate action necessitated by civil disturbances. The (admittedly few) protests in West Pakistan against the army action in East Pakistan never reached the public.

"Satellites over South Asia"

India began granting licenses to private television channels in the 1990s. The satellite dish brought the 1999 Kargil war into homes across the region. The media's reporting on Kargil featured a self-induced censorship, which "slanted public opinion to believe that war is inevitable and military force the only way" (Manchanda 2001). Private television clearly did not necessarily mean independent television; journalists tended to remain mired in their own nationalisms, as they still do, particularly in conflict situations.

NDTV's Barkha Dutt, in an essay for *Himal Southasian* later, recounted how a colonel showed her, behind the army's administrative offices, through a peephole: " […] a head, the disembodied face of a slain soldier nailed onto a tree" 2001). She decided not to report about this "at least not while the war was still on." A Pakistani reporter may have made the same choice in that situation. Her disclosure, in those pre–social media days, went unnoticed probably because it was published in a magazine that is not freely available in Pakistan. In contrast, reports of an Indian soldier being beheaded allegedly by Pakistanis in early January 2013 caused a huge public outcry in India and led to increased tensions between the two countries. There were very few journalists on either side who tried to transcend nationalistic outlooks and dispassionately examine the larger picture, actual facts and context of the incident.

The restrictive visa regime between India and Pakistan further hampers understanding, as does the "protocol" according to which each country allows only two full-time correspondents from the other country to work based in its capital city; the correspondent must obtain permissions to go anywhere else.

The Indian media's dominance during Kargil may have prompted then Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf's much-lauded decision to "free the air waves," granting licenses to private channels in Pakistan in 2002 (which the previous government under Nawaz Sharif had strenuously resisted). This tied in with his "liberal" and "enlightened" image, but allowing private television channels in Pakistan also countered the media blitz from India. General Musharraf later clamped down on these channels when they became critical of him after he sacked the chief justice in 2007, leading to a tumultuous chain of events and his eventual ouster in which the independent media played a huge role. Geo TV, Pakistan's first 24-hour news channel, launched in 2002, was the third private satellite channel in the country (Pakistan now has nearly a hundred private television channels). Pakistan's first private radio station FM 100, launched in 1995, competes with over 130 others. Bangladesh has recently

started its first 24-hour news channel, ATN News, headed by the late Bangladeshi journalist Mishuk Munier, who was part of the starting team of The Real News, a web-based news and analyses channel launched in Canada in 2007 (now Washington-based).

New Politics, New Media, New Ethics?

As Page and Crawley (2009) observe, the state in South Asian countries, after being initially slow to respond to "the challenge of a multichannel universe," has since attempted "to claw back control – as a regulator if not as a broadcaster – through measures like the regulation of cable networks."

> In some fields, it has been aided in this process by technological and economic developments. In India, the tens of thousands of small cable networks gave way within a decade to more expensive, sophisticated systems controlled by a smaller number of players, which made the reassertion of effective regulatory control more achievable. Both Pakistan and India can now black out cross-border channels much more efficiently than they could ten years ago.

But these bans are meaningless today, with television and newspaper content easily available on the Internet. Additionally, the rise of the "paramedia" is chipping away at the carefully constructed edifices of nationalist or religious identities promoted by "big media" in much of the region. Blogs, text messages and social media are influencing public discourse despite their relatively low penetration in the region, making politicians and journalists more accessible and accountable.

The impact of the cross-border media initiative Aman ki Asha remains to be seen. The Times of India Group and Jang Group's editorial policies remain unchanged, as explained in the frequently asked questions (FAQs) link at the Aman ki Asha website: "Aman ki Asha has nothing to do with the editorial policies of either group. News coverage is determined and driven by actual on the ground events. However, we hope that Aman ki Asha will also result in media on both sides presenting a more complete and empathetic picture of 'the other side' – and also of injustices and inequities within their own countries."

A More "Democratic" Media Scene

As mentioned earlier, following the end of the Cold War, the 1990s were marked by a kind of media revival all over South Asia. In Bangladesh, for example, General Hussein Muhammed Ershad's civil–military conglomerate was under increasing attack not only by the media but by the "paramedia" – a "thriving underground press that in many ways has been left unstudied by media experts" (Chowdhury 2007).

The definition of paramedia can now be expanded to include Tweets, blogs and phone text messages. "We know now that when major events occur, the public can

offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on, news coverage is a partnership," acknowledged Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC's World Service and Global News division, following the 7 July terrorist attacks in London (2005).

Professional journalists no longer have a monopoly on news production. The significance of the media-related consumer technology that enables ordinary citizens to play a role in news reporting emerged on 11 September 2001. Amateur video and text messages played a critical role in major networks and newspapers' coverage of the World Trade Center attacks. This has since been evident during other disasters, like the Tsunami in South East Asia in December 2004, the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir where the tremors destroyed the printing presses of local newspapers and the floods of 2010 in Sindh.

Websites and blogs initiated by expatriate South Asians politically and socially engaged with events "back home" also keep the attention on major issues, like an earthquake or floods. During the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir, expats set up www.saquake.org to coordinate relief efforts, and http://www.sarelief.com/ after the 2010 floods in Pakistan. The focus on "South Asia" in both efforts underlines the notion that disaster has no boundaries. Increasingly, posts on Twitter are helping to alert and engage mainstream journalists.

Initiatives like Maati.tv, a web-based television channel in Pakistan, are also breaking multiple barriers. Maati plans to work with rural women and college students, training them to document cases of abuse or harassment with cell phones and upload short reports to its website. The technology will become even more significant when 3G access becomes available, predicts Maati founder M. Waseem. "People will be able to view video wirelessly on their cell phones. This has real potential. The future is in that." The web channel is subsidized by the endowment fund of the Interactive Resource Centre, an activist theater group that he started some time back (Waseem 2011).

South Asians are also investing in online media, like the Urdu language Mastmastradio.com, launched in May 2011. Financed by a US-based Pakistani, its target Pakistani audience may well spill over across the region given its cross-border Urdu/Hindustani music and entertainment focus.

Newspapers' websites in the region are increasingly targeting Internet-savvy readers, locals and expatriates. In Bangladesh, the online bilingual BDnews24.com is a relatively recent addition to Bangladesh's media landscape. Its Bangla language edition gets almost as many hits as the website of *Prothom Alo* site, which is the leading newspaper. In other words, there is "competition of the same product in different spaces" (Chowdhury 2011).

On the down side, the transformation of rural reportage enabled by the cheaper cell phone has led to newspapers slashing travel costs. In fact, many Hindi language papers in India now have subeditors to take care of call-ins that they base stories on (Panneerselvan 2011).

Some argue that blogs, text messages or Twitter updates are not reliable sources of information, as "citizen journalists" are not accountable to editorial policy or journalistic