

## THE MEDIA AS AN ORGAN OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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As a prelude I should like to define what exactly we are talking about: the Media as an Organ of Civil Society? What do we mean by media and what do we mean by Civil Society? Do we inherently think that the media once defined is an organ which has a positive effect on civil society or do we think it has a negative effect? What effect should it have? Should it be an extension of civil society or should it play a more combative role? Why do we only report bad news? Where does information stop and propaganda or sensationalism begin? Why bother with words when pictures tell their own story?

There are other issues as well: What is the role of the media in developing society? What are the essential elements of responsible media? What is the media's role in promoting national security? What role does media have to play in promoting inter-faith harmony?

### **The media**

What do we really mean by media? The word, as you know, comes directly from the plural of the Latin word – medium - which literally means: that which lies in the middle. In other words, we the journalists lie in the middle of what has happened or may be is going to happen and the people; in its purest sense the function of its representatives is to transmit information to people with less knowledge than those who are doing the transmitting. When we look at the media today, we have come a long way from the days of the Court Herald announcing the King or Queen's, Nawab or Nizam or Maharaja or Maharani's – bidding – from the days when the only way to obtain information was through scribes laboriously writing in their quilled pens on bits of parchment paper, but strictly speaking they too were the earliest members of the media.

The media today – a mere five hundred years since the printing press was first developed – has become so multi-faceted, so

multi-dimensional that even one generation has difficulty in understanding the tools used by the next. My children are far more adept at 'surfing' and 'downloading' information – words which did not exist in our vocabulary 20 years ago – than I am – but then I am more adept at using a tape recorder than my parents were. So whereas five hundred years ago, the media was confined to pen and paper, today we have print, audio – visual – electronic - digital, we have satellites in the sky giving us footprints all over the world making the transference of information instantaneous. But going back to the origin of the word 'media' – what are we journalists and writers, reporters, television presenters, trying to achieve by being in the middle?

The ideal is that we are communicating factual information which is of benefit to our fellow human beings, so that they can further their knowledge about a particular aspect of their lives or a particular issue which interests or affects them. Addressing one of the other questions I have posed – *the role of media in society's development* – it must surely be a helpful occupation; the media gives people information they need to know; it can be educative; children can learn from it; so too can adults. Information as basic as the weather forecast tells people how much water there will be for their crops; it makes society more cohesive because we share common knowledge. We can also enjoy common events: think of the pleasure which television has brought to sport coverage across the world; it creates a bond, it is a means of communication which makes us feel part of a larger whole. So far with the media, so good one might say.

But problems arise when, added to what might become a digest of facts and dates, an attempt is made to analyse the information which is being given; when the author puts his or her own slant on the information he or she is imparting, it can mean that we have departed from reporting the truth and are entering the murky world of bias, which, if we are not careful can degenerate still further into propaganda or lies. Thus people are told certain things because the people who are doing the telling want them to believe what they are being told. This can either be malicious or it

can be unintentional due to poor research and therefore poor presentation.

This brings me to the next question: *the media's role in promoting the national interest*. In a country like Pakistan, where the majority of the people are not educated, this is critically important because the media also has the ability to play upon people's ignorance. Here we come up against another definition. What is in the national interest? Who defines the national interest? Is it for example in the national interest to hide from the people that there is going to be a severe drought or famine lest they get panic stricken and stockpile? Or is it in the national interest to forewarn them so that they can make the necessary preparations? Is it in the national interest to allow people to be told when they are losing a war or should that news be withheld from them lest they lose heart?

Propagating a viewpoint in order to achieve a particular objective is as old as time, and can be deadly depending on the nature of the person or people doing the propagation; in the western world, as we have become more educated and have greater and greater access to the fount of knowledge through our ability to travel and see different places, we feel that a certain purity should permeate the information we pass on. Gone are the days, or gone should be the days, when it was possible to dupe the people because of their own ignorance and ours. And one of the key objectives of any form of media must surely be to inform, so that as human beings we are better able to make our own assessments about how we lead our lives and about events which affect our lives.

But supposing this clashes with the national interest? In Britain we have the classic case of the war in Iraq. The government told us that it was in our national interest that we attack Iraq and get rid of Saddam Hussein. But was it? History has still to relate the truth of the matter, but by using this example I am trying to show how fine is the line between using the media in the national interest and turning the media into a propagandist tool for a covert objective. In World War II in Britain, there is no doubt that the British media had propagandist overtones in order to encourage Britons in the war effort and many people would say rightly so. But there is always the

danger that propagating a viewpoint in the national interest can overstep the mark.

### **Responsible media**

This brings me to the most important question of all: what are the essential elements of responsible media? Who sets the standards for responsible media? How do we define responsible media? We have for example in Britain specific broadcasting standards which every so often are reviewed and which generally relate to the use of obscene language and pornography as well as libel. We also have security issues about which it would not be permissible to broadcast. But beyond that who sets the standards? Is it the journalist who writes the article or the editor who oversees it? Or is it always necessary to have some regulatory body over them?

One of the problems here is that the journalist in the field is only as good as the knowledge of the subject which he or she has and this is one of the difficult things about writing; many people want to write and become journalists – it is an attractive career – but certainly what I have learnt throughout my thirty years of journalism is that one is only as good as the interviews one has done and so it is important to make sure that one really has achieved a balanced appraisal. Inevitably unless we are simply relating facts, we are going to be putting our interpretation on what we say because of what we feel and what we have seen, but the important thing is to cast our investigative net wide, not, for example, to find a specific incident and then portray it as a general occurrence because this would be misleading and biased. Therefore the elements of responsible media are the cardinal rules of journalism: accurate, balanced, factual reporting.

Obviously the better informed we are, the more accurate our reporting will be. Why else would journalists risk their lives by being in the front line if it were not so that they could get the best coverage? Gone are the days when one could write from a distance without at least making some attempt to visit the places about which one is writing, if only to see the landscape and better understand the

setting. These too are the essential elements of responsible media: a thirst for knowledge and a genuine desire to transmit that knowledge honestly. When I first started to write on Kashmir during the insurgency, I realised that I could not write a book on Kashmir without visiting the valley – yes, there were dangers but it was my responsibility to find out as much as I could about Kashmir and the Kashmiris before I even considered that I could write a book on the subject.

### **Civil Society**

I asked earlier is media an extension of civil society or should it be more combative? Should our information channels merely be accepting what happens day to day, or should they be pushing the limits, challenging individuals not to accept situations which can be changed for the better? Should for example, the media be used as part of a liberation movement? A typical example occurred right here in the subcontinent in the early and mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of print journalism which enabled the peoples of South Asia to read and come together in order to fight for self government and eventually independence sixty years ago. To a certain extent the same was true in Soviet Russia when Marxist Leninist tracts were smuggled about the country encouraging the people to see more clearly the injustices of the Tsarist regime. The slogan ‘workers of the world unite’ has been handed down as a clarion call in the fight against injustice and what a powerful manifestation of peoples’ grievances it became!

World wide there are numerous examples where the dissemination of information through the media has been used positively to make people realise that they are not alone in their viewpoints and this has given them the courage to alter their situation. Look at the impact which the transmission of the tape recordings of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s voice had in Iran at the start of the Iranian revolution in 1979. So great was the impact that, as you may know, the BBC World Service was criticised for having assisted Khomeini in coming to power by broadcasting his voice!

There are also times when the media has been used negatively in civil society. Just as the power of the written, spoken, electronic word can have a beneficial effect, so can it also have a negative impact. Virtually every revolutionary movement which has taken over in a coup has used the media. Depending on the circumstances, this can be good or bad. Be it South America, Africa or Asia, the new authority has always made sure to gain control of the sources of information i.e. the radio station so that it can broadcast in the new national interest. We have, therefore, these twin pulls in different directions – the media can be a heart pumping energy into civil society or it can be a cancer destroying it. An obvious negative example is Nazi Germany where Josef Goebbels' legendary propaganda machine encouraged thousands, millions of perfectly ordinary Germans to pledge their allegiance to Hitler.

In modern phraseology we call the propaganda element: 'spinning'. There seems to be an obvious reason why we have adopted this terminology, because the art of spinning information does result in catching people in a web. I mentioned the war in Iraq; today in Britain there are very few people – and I count myself among the early dissenters – who do not recognise that our government played on our fears by spinning – by directing us to believe, through the media, that the war in Iraq was essential for our national security. Now of course we are caught in the web it is more difficult to extricate ourselves. The American people blindly supported the war in Vietnam until, through their television screens, they began to doubt its legitimacy.

I posed the question earlier: Why do we always report bad news and never good news? This leads me to one of the biggest problems facing the media today – do we report what we think people want to read /hear/ see or do we report what we think they ought to know about? In Britain, we have our sensational press – known also as the 'gutter' press – papers like the News of the World, the Mirror, the Sun which sell in their millions. Open the pages and you will read about every disaster imaginable, every flood, fire, murder, burglary. Other papers like the Daily Telegraph and The Times sell only in their thousands, partly because they are more serious newspapers with a less sensational flare. The articles

are longer; it takes more time to read them and more time to digest their contents. Recently they too have become a little less studious in order to attract a wider readership. I remember well the furore from the more conservative readership when *The Times* first put a colour photograph on its front page; those who rejected the change, regarded it as an attempt by *The Times* to attract attention by its photographs rather than by the content of its pages.

In general, in Britain the media balances between the two pressures; it both enables people to read about disasters but it also tries to take on issues which its editors consider are important to know about. For example, people might be less interested to know that there has been an improvement in community relations or indeed in inter-faith harmony, compared with finding out more about the lives and loves of the Royal family but a responsible Editor will make sure that there is some space in his pages for informative features even though they might not have the sensational qualities about which people in general like to read.

There is also the problem of the sheer magnitude of what can be covered. After numerous visits to the valley of Kashmir during the insurgency I would often return to phone up the editors of the various newspapers for which I have worked to suggest a Kashmir story – invariably their response was ‘no’ sorry we’re doing Iraq today. In newspapers there are only a few pages devoted to foreign news and with 192 members of the United Nations there is a lot of foreign news to fit in. One of the things which has changed is the growth of the electronic media, where space is virtually unlimited and where all kinds of stories can be printed. This new outlet provides huge advantages in terms of increasing one’s knowledge; not only can I read my local newspapers printed in England but at the press of a button I have *Dawn*, I have the *Kashmir Times* on my screen to read. However, once again there is a downside. The use of internet has enabled people to circumvent the standards and post poorly researched and biased material which can be equally inflammatory and over which there is no control.

### **Editorial Control**

This does of course bring me to Editorial Control. If we are viewing the media as an organ of civil society this is the most powerful weapon determining what is publicised; its close associate - you are familiar with - is called Censorship and I suppose one might say their constant opponent is Freedom of Speech. So Editorial Control - is it good or bad? The answer again is both. Good editorial control can prevent articles being written which are inaccurate, biased and indeed libellous; bad editorial control can mean that articles which express a particular -perhaps unpopular but necessary to know- viewpoint are changed or altered to suit a particular belief or policy. Censorship can prevent articles from ever seeing the light of day. I well remember when I first came to report in Pakistan during the late 1970s that newspapers would frequently appear with large white spaces where text had been eliminated. At the same time censorship can perform a necessary role if what has been censored is likely to harm, insult, libel, or indeed inflame. Yet again there is a fine line, because having completed license to say what we want may cause distress to others. Instead of the media promoting harmony through exposing common views and interests, it can be divisive by exposing hatred and prejudice. Yet still we cling to the freedom of the press as a basic human right of which we should not be deprived. We have grown up in the post World War II era, believing that it is indeed our inherent right to be able to write what we think and not be penalised because of our views. To us this is part and parcel of living in a free society. But, as we know in most countries throughout the world this is not the case - either through editorial control or plain censorship, complete freedom of speech is curtailed.

Sometimes control or censorship can be more indirect - as you know many newspapers rely on advertising - leaning on the advertisers and hence putting pressure on the financial resources of the newspapers and indeed their owners is a subtle but obvious way of exerting editorial control. I know it has happened in Pakistan, and also in many other countries throughout the world. Even in Britain, ever since the newspaper magnate Rupert Murdoch bought The Times newspaper, there is a general feeling that the paper now has



some controlling hand at the top subtly promoting a particular viewpoint and agenda.

### **The media as an institution**

I want now to talk about the sheer power of the media which brings me to my final definition. We are here describing the media as an organ of civil society. I would go one step further and describe it as an institution of civil society. As I mentioned above, the media has developed into so many hybrid manifestations that it is everywhere in our lives. If I refer back again to the court herald, he may have announced the news once a day from the steps of the palace. Today we are subject to news and views 24/7: we wake, we turn on the radio, we have breakfast, we read the newspaper, we go to work, we check the internet, we come home, we watch television, we go to bed, we listen to the radio, we read a magazine. We have a sleepless night – what do we do – we turn on the radio to listen to the BBC World Service!

As an institution, the media has the power to make you laugh and to make you cry, or to make you angry and upset. Only recently there was a programme on the late Princess Diana. It was called 'Witnesses in the Tunnel'; the objective was to vindicate the journalists of any responsibility for the death of Princess Diana. There had been allegations that by attempting to take photographs of the dying princess they had prevented the ambulance getting to her and the doctors from tending to her. Hence with the very valuable medium of photographs and CCTV footage the programme producers managed to recreate exactly what had happened and when. I won't go into all the conspiracy theories about Diana's death but the point here is that the value of the media was in being able - through factual pictures and interviews - to show what happened in the tunnel in the minutes after the car crash; however in doing so there were some pictures shown of Diana which her sons – Princes William and Harry - would have preferred not to have broadcast and they did not want the programme aired; in deference to their concern, the producers agreed to block out Diana's face but they felt it was important to air the programme in order to impart the information which it contained. As an organ of civil society-

promoting greater understanding of the situation – one might therefore say that here the media played a useful role – but it was treading a fine line because of the grief it caused to the members of the late Princess's family.

### **Pictures**

I want now to talk about pictures because photographs, almost more than anything else, perform a valuable role. What is good about images is that proverbially the camera does not lie. They also have an immediacy of impact which the printed word lacks. You have to take the time to read an article or listen to a radio broadcast, whereas you simply have to view a photograph to form an opinion. One of the most famously influential pictures was that of the young Vietnamese girl nearly naked burning from napalm which said more about the war in Vietnam than almost anything anybody had written. Although I am not a photographer I would say that when considering the media as an organ – or as I have also said – an institution of civil society, photographs can and do play a leading role. Why do we want a photograph to illustrate an article? The answer is because it makes it more immediate; the reader can identify better with what he is reading if he can glimpse the person or place about whom the article has been written. Why are there more people who watch television than those who read a newspaper or listen to the radio?

The other great advantage is that pictures are less easily corrupted. I say 'less easily' because with modern technology they can be tampered with; they can also be selective. And they can be subject to censorship – a distressing picture may not be shown either for fear of upsetting the viewer or because in so doing it might cause the viewer to adopt an opinion about a particular situation which the owner/proprietor/editor of the information outlet may think they had better not adopt. I cite the publication of the cartoons of the Holy Prophet PBUH in Denmark, which resulted in an outcry against Denmark. This is perhaps an example where a 'responsible' editor would have seen the offence these cartoons were going to cause and have decided not to print them. This is censorship, you will say, but often it is the case of which is the lesser of two evils. A popular

adage is to say 'publish and be damned' but perhaps we can grant that there are times when we must be more circumspect.

I am mentioning this example because I believe it adequately demonstrates the power the media has through images – just like headlines - because they attract our attention and make us form an instant opinion and possibly react to it. This also brings me to the role of the media and interfaith harmony. There is an obvious advantage if the media acts responsibly and in an educative manner – there is a disadvantage if it acts irresponsibly and merely serves to inflame.

### **Lessons for the future?**

I have spoken broadly because the media is a global institution. There are lessons to be learnt from all aspects of how we handle the media and how it handles us. In the thirty years I have been writing, which includes numerous trips to both Pakistan and India, I have graduated from the manual typewriter, the photocopier in the bazaar and going to send my articles from the telex machine to a situation where I can email what I have written from my hotel bedroom or even the comfort of my home in England. Undoubtedly the technological revolution has not only reached but it has also benefited Pakistan as it has many other developing countries throughout the world. More importantly, at a time when other institutions are fragile, it can perform a useful role of informant, provided it is allowed to do so and provided it takes its responsibilities seriously. I have many friends amongst Pakistan's journalists and I know how hard they have fought sometimes in more difficult times to report honestly and fairly what is going on. I know there are pressures and difficulties. As I have mentioned, these pressures are both editorial and managerial. I was fortunate to have worked for the BBC World Service when I began my career in journalism and know, at a time when the press was really controlled, how much of a lifeline it was so that people could get closer to the truth about their daily lives.

In conclusion, the media as an organ or institution has a very important role to play in civil society; it is not always an easy role; it

must never be subservient to any other institution. At the same time it must take its responsibilities seriously because, more almost than the government of the day, it has the power to shape opinions.

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