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Reporting **Religion**

DILEMMAS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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Reporting Intolerance

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The Dilemma

- Reporting extremism and intolerance by a so-called “neutral” media (whose neutrality is doubtful and debatable) poses a serious dilemma, as faced by democrats and the universal democratic values they tend to represent in the face of extremists:
- If media do not report extremists and their intolerant creeds, they will be failing in their basic function to report the information as it comes and dubbed as bias or partisan;

- And if they do report extremists' activities/proclamations, they may become instrumental in lending a helping hand to those who are bent upon undermining the very principled democratic premise of tolerance and free speech on which stands the fourth estate
- Assuming media are neutral then they will face no dilemma in reporting extremism and intolerance, no matter even if they end up as a free enterprise.

- And if they truly uphold undiluted freedom of speech, as in the case of Danish cartoons and their reproduction ostensibly in defense of freedom of expression, they must not feel shy in reporting extremism which may be quite “normal” for those who profess it and yet seen by others as intolerable.
- **The question is not that the media must report extremism and intolerance but how it should and why shouldn't it uncritically?**

Are Media Neutral?

The media have become too diversified. The Wikileaks and the new media have now rendered all restrictions on right to know and freedom of expression superfluous.

- Being the mirror of society, according to the popular notion, media are supposed to be neutral as they report. They are expected to report objectively without taking sides among the adversaries.
- Journalists are called upon to keep “balance” while covering all sides of the story equitably and not to align with one or the other adversary. Regardless of what happens around them, journalists must remain faithful to their professional duty by keeping neutrality.

- The professional standards demand accuracy by sifting fact from fiction and rumor from reality. All possible considerations-- ethnic, religious, ideological, patriotic, class, gender, material and spiritual, etc.—must not interfere with the performing of their duties as journalists. All these virtues are praiseworthy, but they have their dialectical pitfalls. Neither do the media nor do the media practitioners function in a vacuum.
- After all, like any other business, media sells and whatever is sellable to a variety of consumers, including the commoditization of religion and mass consummation of its products.

- The political economy of media underlines their role inherently inhibited by the social forces that influence them, including religious extremism, interest groups that control them and the constituencies they address. Although the media are the most effective tool to know and express, they are circumscribed by their dependence on the national/local market, religious market included, and the nation-state which mostly represent majoritarian or dominant interests.
- Being a product of certain historical time and space and groomed in a peculiar socio-cultural environment, the journalists carry all the baggage they have inherited from the society they live in and are imbibed with all the traits, taboos and prejudices they pick from their social environment unless they have not outgrown them.

- Objectivity, neutrality and non-partisanship are considered necessary conditions to unearth the truth and report it honestly. But the objectivity may not necessarily reflect fairness, nor do the “balancing” approach between a rapist and the victim of rape may do justice to a story.
- In a situation of un-equals there can't be an equitable treatment of a story unless you are serving the interests of the dominant while keeping façade of a balanced and neutral approach. How could media remain neutral between the aggressor and the aggressed, perpetrator and the victim, just and unjust?

- But, usually, this is not to be the main dividing line. Given the allegiance to one's nationhood, ethnicity, ideology, religion and social interests, media are condemned to take sides, report half-truths or one-side of the story that suits their side of the divide barring very few honorable exceptions.
- Since most media is nation-centric, it tends to defend its own nationalism against the "other". Same is true about the situations of conflict where media generally fail to rise above the religious, ethnic, ideological, nationalist and racial divides.

- Like all social phenomenon, media are also stratified and diversified. With the advent of most modern information technologies, media's penetration, scale and influence have tremendously multiplied, allowing religious extremists as well to adopt communication strategies to maximize the use of electronic and new media to reach out to widest audiences.
- And the greater are the audiences, the bigger the benefits and profits. Consequently, one finds a mushroom growth of broadcasting and internet usage by the religious extremists. Increasingly, public and private space is being filled with the religious extremist content which is intolerant of the "other".

- Given their “popularity” and wider reception, sections of so-called neutral and secular media in both private and public sectors are also increasingly inclined to cater to the most conservative and extremist audiences.
- In their competition to outwit each other and win over more audiences and jump to higher ratings, the media is susceptible to the temptations of catering to the extremist longings.

- As media succumb to conservative waves and find most sexy stories among the militants and clicking to heart rendering images produced almost on daily basis by terrorist acts of armed propaganda, they instigate most conflicting polarization and mutually reinforcing xenophobia that feed into demonization of whole people, such as Muslims and various religious minorities, and consequently reinforce most discriminatory and fascist tendencies on both sides of the divide.

- With globalization, extremism, its religious variant in particular, has also found its recipients across the borders and continents. The communal propaganda warfare is now being fought over the airwaves and cyber space among the competing televangelists of various intolerant religious creeds. Not only that the diasporas from most countries of Asia are feeding into extremist Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Sikh revivalism back home, but also the globalization of religion and its commoditization is expanding the media market to unprecedented scales.

- In situations of conflict between ethnic, religious/sectarian groups and nation-states, the media most conveniently fall prey to the jingoism of one's own state or ethnic/sectarian group.
- They ignore the beast within their own "nation" or "community", "sect", etc., and find fault with the "other" conflicting side which is demonized as a whole. Nationalism, cultural chauvinism, religious self-righteousness and illusions of one's own superiority over the other become hot content to sell to the domestic audience.

- By creating “heroic” and “villainic” models and symbols and pitching the jingoistic antes at high pedestals of intolerance, the media not only become prisoner of its own creation but also do not leave room for dissent (by peace journalism) or its own retreat. Indo-Pak media is the classic example and other example was seen during the Balkan crisis among various ethnically/religiously drive media.

Covering Extremism and Intolerance

- As against the altruistic notions of neutrality, objectivity and balancing, the media take sides wrongly or rightly, justly or unjustly which are also relative and contestable.
- As a part of democratic framework, media have to adhere to democratic values and professional ethics.
- But, understandably, some proponents of free media remain skeptical of taking sides or committing to value-based journalism, such as promoting the cause of peace, as they apprehend it may compromise their neutrality and justify the war mongers and extremist ideological press. They, however, forget that they will be ironically giving a free hand and walkover to the adversaries of peace, freedom, pluralism, tolerance and civil and human rights.

- Professional ethics of journalism, various national laws and international covenants, of the UN in particular, prohibit use of violence against the unarmed and innocent people, spreading hatred, ridiculing or disrespecting the faith of others, preaching and using violent means, promoting intolerance and suppressing dissent, protecting minorities, women and children, right to life, freedom of expression, right to know, etc.
- Therefore, caution and restraint on all those counts that fuel hatred and incite conflict and violence, undermine fundamental human rights, peace, promote discrimination and violence on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender and nationality are not only binding on the media practitioners but also media are under professional obligations to take a firm and consistent stand against extremism, conflict and intolerance.

- By becoming an instrument in the hands of hate mongers, perpetrators of violence and preachers of intolerance media will only be undermining the very premise of its intellectual enterprise.

Cautions, Restraints and Obligations

Johan Galtung, Professor of Peace Studies, proposes 12 points on conflict reporting, as mentioned by Laxmi Murthy the Hand Book on Conflict Reporting she edited.

- a) De-contextualizing violence
- b) Dualism: reducing the number of parties in conflict to two
- c) Manichaeism: portraying one side as “good” and demonizing other side as “evil”
- d) Armageddon: presenting violence as inevitable while omitting alternatives

- e) Focusing on individual acts of violence while avoiding structural causes like poverty, state repression, discrimination, disenfranchisement, etc
- f) Confusion: focusing only on the conflict arena but not on the forces and factors which influence violence
- g) Excluding the bereaved thus never explaining why there acts of revenge and spirals of violence. Failure to explore the causes of escalation and the impact of the media coverage
- h) Failure to explore the goals of outside interventionists. Failure to explore peace proposals

- i) Confusing cease fires and negotiations of peace
- j) Omitting reconciliation efforts and reinforcing fatalism

Some Suggestions:

- a) Help broaden the search for non-violent solutions
- b) Highlight dangers and cost of violence
- c) Defend Communities by exposing human rights violations
- d) Provide timely information to parties in conflict through fair and balanced reporting. Ask questions that shed new light on the conflict to enable those involved to examine their attitudes or motivations. i.e. Reframing the alternate points of view to each and every story

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- e) Project more aspects of conflicting situations than just one, because multiplicity is essential to human nature and it survives under and outlives the most monolithic regimes
- f) Provide communication channels or exchange of information to contending parties
- g) Give early warning
- h) Suggest ways to address the underlying issues of conflict
- i) Give the public information on how to avoid danger and survive violent conflict. Include information about relocating to less affected areas.

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- j) Create awareness of the needs and suffering of communities caught in conflict to both local and international stakeholders
- k) Have a deeper understanding of peace processes/negotiations
- l) Give all people affected by conflict a voice
- m) Quash rumors
- n) Break Stereotypes
- o) Cover the surge of peace activism
- p) Parity of esteem for needs and suffering in place of “Worthy” and “Unworthy” victimhood

Checklist for Reporting Conflict

- a) Looking beyond the routine of covering what, when, where and who?
- b) For accuracy the following points need to be followed:
Distinguish between first and second hand sources; first hand information gathering; a confirmation from more than one source; caution while using newspaper clippings, double check facts and produce no errors; check and recheck dates, names, titles, etc.
- c) Avoid exaggeration
- d) Avoid value judgments

- e) Avoiding stereotypes; do not let stereotypes serve as implicit theories, biasing the perception, interpretation, encoding, retention and recalled information about people;
- f) Go beyond handouts and examine the “Line” or “Angle” – be it the official government or dissenting anti-government
- g) Do not report religious, ethnic, or linguistic affiliations unless it is relevant to the story
- h) Do not treat an entire community as a monolith, such as, the Muslim Community in India, Ahmadi Community in Pakistan, Tamil Community in Sri Lanka as a homogeneous category and ignore regional, linguistic and cast differences

Questions Need to Be Asked?

- a) What is the present?
- b) Why is the present conflict taking place?
- c) What is the history of the conflict?
- d) What are the social economic roots?
- e) Who are the actors in the conflict?
- f) What does each of the parties have to gain or lose?
- g) What are the vested interests in creating or continuing the conflict?
- h) What is the human element of the conflict?
- i) Who is suffering the most?
- j) What is the official line about the conflict?
- k) What is the perspective of the common people that are affected?
- l) Going beyond official versions and facts?

- m) Go beyond the elites and get the perspective of ordinary people
- n) Go beyond reporting only what divides the sides of the conflict
- o) Go beyond the suffering of one side alone and treat all sides experience and suffering as newsworthy
- p) Do not allow suffering to be a sensational story past forgotten
- q) Use diverse sources and go beyond “Said to be” or “Reportedly” or “Reliable” sources
- r) Cross check before declaring the source as “Reliable”
- s) Verify all sources
- t) Beware of official manipulation
- u) Avoid one-sidedness

- v) Beware of using defamatory and controversial nomenclature that create divisions and animosities, such as, insider/outsider/terrorists or freedom fighters/infiltrators/refugee intruder
- w) Avoid emotive language

Conclusion:

In conflict situations there is no alternative to rising above national/religious/ethnic divides:

- a) In pre-conflict situations, journalists must try to caution against the dangers of conflict and bring to fore peaceful options to avoid or preempt conflict; confidence building measures should be highlighted while restraining provocations and avoiding to raise the temperatures;
- b) During Conflict the job of journalists is too difficult; they must not be embedded to one conflicting party or other; avoid becoming a too in the propaganda warfare of one country/group or the other;

- c) In post conflict situations, the journalists must highlight the havoc created by the conflict, instead of eulogizing the “victories” of “their” side and “humiliation/losses” of the “other” side while offering alternatives to conflict and conflict resolution

While reporting extremism media must not become an instrument in promoting violence, hatred, ridicule, defaming of one religion/sect or the or the other. They must avoid publishing reports/ideas that fuel communalism or ridicule the sacred sentiments of others.