The Information War-III

Shahwar Junaid

There has been an increase in public awareness that various kinds of communications media activity can encourage specific behavior and consumption patterns. Besides creating a business culture, media activity can also contribute to the creation of a political environment. The creation of a specific type of political environment is likely to be undertaken because it serves the strategic, political and economic agendas of alliances of national, regional and international power brokers, institutions and coalitions organized to perform specific tasks. It can also serve the purpose of other types of vested interest groups. Awareness of these facts has grown during the past three decades since the results of research and official discussion on the subject have been made public by human rights activists in the industrialized countries. Some information has also filtered down to the populations of less developed countries. These populations need such information in order to see the truth, the reality, behind media hype and make well-considered political choices. A small dose of background information is usually enough to provoke discrimination-communities automatically begin to sift through the mass of material being provided to them through various media of communication.

The idea that media activity, by itself, can change public opinion is a misconception. Lack of information and disinformation can, however, distort public perceptions of a situation. Public opinion is created through the interaction of information with a number of things including traditional and socio-religious values, hopes and fears, perceptions of reality, needs, etc. Facts and analyses presented through media reflect images of reality to which the public reacts. For instance, anti-war demonstrators in Europe, Britain and the United States came out by the thousand to protest against civilian casualties in the US war in Afghanistan-obviously what they were seeing on television was not their idea of a war on terrorism.

Such protest demonstrations served one other purpose-a show of popular disapproval of civilian casualties in a severely impoverished part of the world was one way of deflecting the hostility of extreme elements and Muslim populations from ordinary citizens in the states of the coalition fighting in Afghanistan. Similar protests in Pakistan, on the other hand, highlighted the enormous, and growing, gulf between the government's policy and public opinion. A peaceful rally by moderate middle class elements, including workers, in the city of Rawalpindi was the breaking point for officialdom. It was thought to herald a larger political movement and led to the swift incarceration of a large number of political activists. Since this was perceived to have been instigated by the American presence in Pakistan, as are negotiations for a rapprochement with many discredited political elements, there has been a swelling wave of anger and dislike for the Alliance at war in Afghanistan.

Research shows that the public gravitates towards those media, specific information channels, newspapers and magazines that reinforce the views they already hold, or, are inclined towards. Nevertheless, media faces pressure to toe the official line at every level. There is international pressure to promote global values regardless of the lack of relevance in local conditions-you must want a refrigerator even if you do not have electricity. National broadcasting systems and local networks aspire to shift attention to the micro level and address national and community concerns. The manner in which media are handled and communications systems are organized in a country, or community, reflects a political decision based on a prevalent system of values. Such decisions may be taken by the leadership on the basis of its perception of public needs. If this perception differs from the actual needs of the population it soon becomes apparent through the rejection of messages conveyed.

Shifts in official value systems may take place due to any number of reasons. Whenever major shifts in value are observed in public policy regarding information provision these are of interest to the international community as a whole and at the bilateral level as well. Management and censorship are expected to exist in less developed areas: there are reports that the Bush administration recently requested Qatar to "contain" the Al-Jazeera television channel, which has a potential audience of 35 million Arabic speakers. The channel was the only one reporting directly from within Afghanistan. The request was denied with the comment that press freedom is fundamental to parliamentary democracy, which Qatar expects to introduce within the next two years. Meanwhile the Bush administration virtually censored the use of Al-Jazeera clips reporting the situation in Afghanistan with graphic coverage of civilian casualties and destruction.

There was a marked decrease in the use of footage from Al-Jazeera by major Western networks within two weeks of the war on Afghanistan. Once US and British personnel entered the country and established communication networks the information gleaned from Al-Jazeera footage was no longer necessary for military purposes. On the other hand, its persistent coverage of civilian losses inflamed public opinion and made it a nuisance. The charge that US bombers targeted the Kabul office of Al-Jazeera satellite television channel on Monday, November 12, therefore needs to be taken seriously. The US government had been given the location of the channel's office in Kabul. During hostilities third country non-combatants may even signal their presence to bombers by breaking the blackout and flashing lights-BBC and Al-Jazeera were reportedly on the air when the latter's office was bombed. The channel was allowed to operate from Afghanistan while the information it was providing was needed by the US military. Then it was punished. These are not the rules by which the game is played on US territory. Such incidents are a reminder that the rules of the game are different on foreign soil.

Throughout the Western world there are regular institutionalized discussions to assess the moral and socio-political impact of national and transnational communications media activity. Such discussions are based on the feedback from carefully chosen target groups in society and are expected to contribute to the evolution of guidelines for public policy with regard to media regulation. Such guidelines are expected to safeguard public interest. What they often do is nudge media into promoting the official line. The BBC, for instance, has an independent board of governors but it is a public corporation dependent on government funds and money from license fees-it is authorized to collect these fees by the state. In those countries where major media conglomerates are privately owned and less dependent on official patronage, the opinions of the political leadership and media owners and managers may differ not only with regard to the relative importance of various issues but with regard to the stance that needs to be taken. A strong business community that is a source of revenue through advertising will create its own media presence. Similarly, if various organs of the state are a source of revenue and support their presence will become visible.

In Pakistan the military has always had substantial special service funds at its disposal for information and public relations work. The interest of the military in civil affairs and politics grew by leaps and bounds after the early years of independence. To satisfy the desire for political control that could not be achieved at the very outset, through an abortive coup in 1951, military competence has been a carefully cultivated myth protected by sweeping national security laws-probably the only laws that are actually enforced in Pakistan. It is debatable whether political instability led to military intervention in civil affairs or vice versa. Many methods were used to increase the stature of the forces despite a number of reverses over the years. The war of 1965 led to a patriotic upsurge. At the time an elitist vision replaced exclusivity and the separation of the civil and military functions of state authority.

A popular media campaign was designed to establish superiority over civilian culture in all aspects. National songs eulogized not specific feats or battles but the military breed or "race", in Pakistan. A Punjabi song of this genre says, in effect, that the mothers of soldiers are a breed apart from ordinary womenfolk in the country. It is significant that this song remains an anthem that is played every year on Defense Day. The men who helped create these myths and those who grew up with them and sheltered under them are now finding it hard to share power with another phenomenon they helped create-the religious militias that were to wage jehad and conquer the world for them. The speed with which the military government of Pakistan abandoned its erstwhile allies in Afghanistan speaks volumes about truth and fiction in national policy and the substance of spiritual values that are said to underlie military enterprise in Islam, the official religion of the country. This has made it all the more difficult for the civilian population to swallow platitudes about morality and accountability flowing from the military government-the Punjab Minister for Local Bodies and Rural Development, a retired military officer, was reported to have directed the inclusion of a book on corrupt politicians in the syllabus of educational institutions in the province. Similar pamphlets have been produced under successive military governments and form a part of exercises in futility in the field of information provision. Perhaps they should all be included in school syllabi and the three "R"s should be thrown out.

E-mail queries and comments to: shahwar@nation.com.pk

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