The politics of information-2001

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The economic, political and social environment of entire culture systems has been transformed through the globalization of information activity. The power equation between national institutions has changed and decision making processes have been affected. No matter how hard top leadership tries to insulate strategic decision making from public opinion the impact is there, albeit in varying degrees and depending on the prevalent political system. This is not surprising because such decision making seeks to alter the human condition through various means including the manipulation of the national and global information environment.

News coverage, current affairs analyses and entertainment material beamed across international boundaries are a reflection of the human condition but also create reality as seen through the eyes of information media and those who control and operate information media systems. Since transnational communication systems operate across national boundaries and even national communication systems aspire to do so, it is no longer possible to present one picture before domestic audiences and another view before the international community without fear of exposure. Diplomatic reaction time has also been reduced: events taking place in distant parts of the world are often splashed across television screens as they occur and audiences demand analyses and government reaction. Sophistication, scholarship and diplomatic ability are needed to cope with the pace that has been set. In their own way these changes are as profound as those brought about by the industrial revolution that ushered in the machine age. The industrial revolution became the model of progress for the underdeveloped and poor countries of the world during the decolonization period that began after World War II. However, there are still a number of underdeveloped countries where exposure to even national information media is extremely limited by poverty and issues of survival. Similarly there are pockets of extreme political and cultural poverty within the industrialized world and in developing countries where these things do not matter. Other areas slip back into this mode under pressure and when disaster strikes.

Society adjusts to accommodate changes occuring due to technological development, growing outreach and increase in the influence of various kinds of information activity. Governments in industrialized countries monitor the impact of media on politics, culture and value systems. National security institutions and academia analyze media activity and study resulting changes at the national, institutional, community and individual level. The implications are analyzed for impact on strategic interests. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that there is a close relationship between the management of influential media corporations and agencies and government in industrialised countries. This does affect editorial comment and coverage of matters of national interest. While the broad parameters of the term are agreed, the definition of "matters of national interest" is open to interpretation by the parties involved.

The impact of media activity on society, as well as on political and strategic decision-making, varies under different political systems and from country to country, as does the role of the press and media organizations in both molding and reflecting public opinion. The status, and nature of power, enjoyed by the free press differs substantially from that of government owned public information systems and media organizations. Under most democratic political systems press and media conglomerates are just one of many institutions interacting and sharing power within society. Under some systems media organizations perform unique functions. Under others they seek to displace each other, etc. For instance, the situation of the press in India differs from that in Pakistan, though they are products of shared history and traditions, largely because they have functioned under different political systems. They also perform different roles in society, as a result.

In India there are a large number of institutions that share political power under a written constitution: the powers of the central government and the state are clearly defined. Assemblies at both levels meet regularly. The opposition is active and enjoys freedom and fights to retain it. The judiciary is actively involved in the interpretation of the constitution. This is an environment in which political power is shared. In this kind of environment consensus is required for decision-making at the national level. The press, and media organizations, provide the public with information. They project the views of power groups that exist in society, present analyses of various situations and events, suggest decision making options and consider the possibility of one or other option being accepted under given circumstances. However, given the number of participants, individual and institutional, who are bound to participate in the national decision making process as a result of existing institutional arrangements, the impact of the press on actual decision making is bound to be extremely limited. In such an environment, in order to protect decision-making processes from untimely opposition, that may be a result of factors that have nothing to do with the matter in hand, discretion is called for. Unless, of-course, the objective is to subvert the outcome. In this context the breakfast meeting with the Indian press during Indo-Pak talks in Agra was not just unnecessary, it was ill advised.

The situation in Pakistan is different. The Constitution is being held in abeyance. The judiciary has been sworn in under a provisional constitution order (PCO). A President who was subsequently removed from office administered the oath. Under the provisional constitution order the judiciary is bound to accept changes by ordinance in the legal framework and political set-up of the country that are made by the military regime in power. The press in Pakistan is sustained by revenue from two sources-the private and the public sector. Due to the interference of government agencies in the operation of private enterprise there has always been reluctance to support those organizations and individuals that are critical of government policy and performance. The private sector is also under pressure due to economic recession and advertisement revenues from this sector are diminishing. The possibility of the creation of private sector media organizations exists. However, such organizations can only contribute to the creation of a progressive environment in a vibrant, diverse economy where the private sector enjoys the protection of the law. Public sector media organizations have a mandate to promote and project official policy through approved personalities and organizations. Under these circumstances, and in the absence of representative national institutions, the role of the press in Pakistan is unique to the country and differs from that of the press elsewhere. The establishment needs to remember this when dealing with media in other countries. In this context, members of Pakistan's establishment who aspire to prominence on the global information stage need to remember that it is better to eschew momentary public attention in favor of solid achievement, which brings its own long-lasting rewards.

In the fast moving global information environment the need for consistency and effective policy coordination cannot be overemphasized. This is particularly essential with regard to formulation, projection and comment on official policy. One of the more simple facts of life is that credibility comes from staying with the truth-inconsistency and compromise on matters of principle can destroy credibility of state policy. Information media pick up inconsistency without even trying. All media has to do is report the facts accurately, in order to do so. News about the situation in Afghanistan and media coverage of the situation in Kashmir are cases in point. During the process of conquering their own homeland the Taliban enforced crude forms of Islamic Law geared to subjugating and controlling the population. Now that the primary task has been accomplished and they wish to move on to reconstruction, which requires foreign investment, they are having a tough time living down the image they have created. The image will not change and aid will not flow in the direction they want it to flow until they re-examine their attitude for flaws and adjust policies to accommodate those of their citizens who have fled the country as a result of policy-induced hardship.

These days media coverage of the situation in Kashmir is strikingly similar to the coverage of the Afghan war during the 1980's-a daily recital of the number of encounters, deaths etc. During the 1980's a private sector data collection outfit used to gather information from various sources (including military sources) and pass it on to the information department which would use it in its monotonous daily coverage of the Afghan situation. It is easy to turn up the intensity of such media efforts, or to lower it, as required. In the case of Afghanistan the outcome was not expected to be influenced by any kind of media effort. Those in charge at this time need to re-examine the objective of media coverage of the situation in Kashmir and make an effort to achieve that objective.

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