

The information war – II

Not
correct
15/11

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All information activity is a reflection and interpretation of the world around us. It is the sum total of the elements that shape the human condition and the environment in which it exists. These elements include the social, the economic and the political, among others.

Overlapping media footprints carry the experiences of one section of humanity to other areas. This exposure can be that prelude to the interpretation and analysis of world events which can shape the conduct of national affairs and the behaviour of communities. Perceptions of reality must be based on correct information if sound decisions are to be made. For instance, the breakdown of communism in the Western hemisphere was expected to bring about fundamental changes in many spheres of human endeavour at the international, regional and national level, across the globe. It was expected that the elimination of bipolar hostility would reduce competition to influence smaller nations. The possibility of nuclear conflict was also expected to recede. There was to be a relocation of power outwards from the traditional centres of power.

Moves to promote democratic values and democratic institutions were expected to lead to the acceptance of basic human and civil rights as the worldwide norm. The overthrow of communist rule in Eastern and Central Europe was thought to augur well for freedom movements elsewhere, such as in Palestine and Kashmir. The globalization of financial services, and ease in the movement of international capital, was expected to lead to an increase in foreign direct investment. This was to take the place of dwindling concessionary development assistance: the industrialized countries were no longer interested in maintaining their spheres of influence through financial intervention in other parts of the world once the communist threat was eliminated. Privatization of state enterprises was supposed to create unprecedented opportunities for enterprise in hitherto managed economies. A combination of such economic and political developments was expected to lead to a more equitable distribution of the benefits of capital investment between states and within communities. At the same time it was expected that economic interdependence between nations would eventually make peace more profitable than war over territorial disputes. In other words, the basic values on which the business of states is conducted were expected to undergo a change. Many important decisions taken by the international community and by many individual states were based on this, and similar, information.

Profound changes did occur in the distribution of power within economic, political and security systems across the globe. However these changes did not produce the results expected. This could have been due to a number of reasons. However, there is little doubt now that the public was misinformed about the objectives of global change. The actual agenda of power groups that brought about global change was different from their avowed goals.

The major international media groups take their cue from governments on issues that are perceived to be of strategic importance. It is, therefore, necessary to review their sins of omission and commission from time to time and to consider their role in creating an information environment around us. Emphasis on one aspect of current affairs may not

present an accurate picture of the state of affairs. For instance, about two weeks ago reportage of the situation in Afghanistan was severely limited by Western editors. It was resumed once the Northern Alliance began to move towards Kabul. A number of images created, however, are likely to be enduring: volunteers from Muslim countries were shown entering Afghanistan in small Suzuki vans with supplies strapped to the sides of the well used vehicles; subsequently, triumphant Northern Alliance troops were shown in new fatigues, their boots barely broken in, racing on dirt roads in brand new Mercedes Benz trucks and well oiled tanks. A decade earlier the fall of the Soviet Union and the creation of its successor, the Commonwealth of Independent States, received a great deal of coverage, as did breaking of the Berlin Wall and streets protests in the states of East and South Eastern Europe. The collapse of the "Evil Empire", as it was called, was supposed to usher in an era of economic progress, civil liberty and democracy in the successor states of the former Soviet Union.

Within three years of the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the heralding of a new age

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of democracy, the newly independent states were seen to have been allowed to quietly slip back into the hands of those domestic hierarchies that had controlled them under communist rule. The focus of media coverage shifted from political to economic affairs.

Reliable surveys conducted during the 1990s showed two divergent political trends: continued growth of electoral democracy (adult franchise/voting) and the stagnation of liberal democracy (institutionalized democracy/democratic norms/the rule of law), an indication of the decline of freedom and civil liberty. The former grew from 76 in 1990 to 117 in 1995 but the latter decline from 85 per cent of the total to 65 per cent during the same period. The quality of democracy declined and the military was used to help regulate and support political institutions—with disastrous results for the civil population. Under the circumstances there was no chance of building what are called "civic traditions". There was also no need to consider the central role of a pact as a form of elite convergence at the national or international level, requiring a compromise among elites and their followers in which each is willing to forego attempts to dominate or subjugate other groups. Without an in-depth review of the consequences it has been possible to underplay the tensions created within global political and security arrangements as a result.

The political, social and economic choices made by the international community at the momentous time when the Soviet Union passed into history

created conflicts that continue to haunt the world today. A deliberate state/media alliance created an illusion of global peace and prosperity ignoring the festering sores of economic exploitation, racism, ethnicity, territorial ambition, corruption and international crime, among other things. The activity of Western media following the September 11 attacks on US territory and the launching of a war that was initially, spontaneously and memorably, referred to as a "crusade" has been guided by the establishment. As a result, the information available to the public is limited.

There continues to be an enormous gulf between the realities of conflict management and actual relief work and the understanding of Western leadership of what is required. For instance, President Chirac of France recently made the amazing suggestion that a UN World Conference be held to discuss various aspects of humanitarian relief for those affected by the new Afghan War. The Secretary General of the United Nations endorsed his proposal: both are aware that substantial funds are now available for the purpose. Apparently neither is aware of ground realities in Afghanistan, which has been reduced to a pile of rubble by carpet-bombing over vast inhabited tracts and where cold weather

will soon make it impossible to ferry in relief goods although several million people displaced by war are in dire need of the necessities of life. They cannot wait for a UN World Conference to decide what they should have.

Another aspect of the situation that is being underplayed by media relates to the polarization between East and West, Christianity and Islam, that does not bode well for the future of world peace. The breakdown of the Israeli/Palestinian peace process, the target killing of political activists and Israeli incursions into

Palestinian controlled areas, the adoption of similar tactics by the United States, with laws sanctioning the assassination of those it considers necessary to eliminate to serve the purposes of its war on terror, have created resentment, confusion and unprecedented levels of tension and hostility throughout the Muslim world—regardless of what the official leadership in such Muslim states says about the state of affairs. Hints that the United States' War on Terrorism will soon shift focus, from Afghanistan, which will be snowbound, to Iraq, have not been well received, even by US Allies in this venture. New attacks on Iraq will be seen as an attempt to keep up the pressure on Muslim populations and nothing else.

At worst it could unleash fresh waves of terror from new sources, forcing US and British citizens, among others, who are at work in other parts of the world to seek safety on their own territories. The West will be pushed back to its own shores.

The United States and Britain have become the hostages of decades old foreign policy decisions which have made their citizens the targets of hostility and unsafe in many parts of the world. Since both countries have been donors of large amounts of development assistance and grants worldwide there is a need to analyze the origin of such hostility and remove its causes. Until this is done no amount of clever editing and information management will work.

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