



Security Nexus Perspectives

MEDIA AND THE SECURITY PRACTITIONER

By Shyam Tekwani*

Summary: *The centrality of media in our lives is indisputable. Diminishing trust in mainstream media coupled with the primacy of social media has made the information landscape murkier. And as an integral part of this complex information environment, we are what we consume. It is therefore vital, as security practitioners, that we recognize our own vulnerabilities in this ecosystem, and sharpen our abilities to think critically.*

The Role of News Media in Society: The current picture

Among the functions of the news media is its role as a civil watchdog scrutinizing the actions of those in power who claim to act in public interest. Holding governments and other powerful actors accountable, informing the public about issues and events, and facilitating social change through political engagement by the public, constitute the core responsibilities of journalism.

The media, it would appear, is failing in its duties. Witness the widespread outrage against journalism in recent times and the compelling belief that journalism is now more of a public health hazard than a noble public service. This, even as we have access, across an overwhelming choice of media, to diverse news and influential journalism than at any time since the birth of the Fourth Estate, as the free press was called, in the 18th Century.

Accompanying the 21st Century's meteoric rise through social media of the political, cultural and security value of information are its three enduring partners, partisanship, propaganda and phony news. The news business today, in successfully appealing to our baser instincts, is shaped by two dominating principles – sensationalism and trivialization – a consequence of commercialization. But this is not a novel development.

Generations of journalists across the globe will recall the story their editors regaled them with when the competition was jockeying to outrace their circulation numbers. [The legend](#) goes that the editor of a

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Victorian paper, facing a threat to his paper's bottom line, in despair prescribed a formula: a cocktail of religion, royalty, sex and mystery. "Oh My God," said the Queen. "I am pregnant! I wonder who did it?"

The competition, evidently, wilted.

Apocryphal or not, this newsroom anecdote appears to have replaced the original [charter](#) as media's compass in these times. Religion (Islamophobia), the intimate lives of celebrities, titillating political scandals, and shrill sensationalism dominate what passes for news across platforms.

The Role of News Media in Security: Terrorism, Conflict & Foreign Policy

As an integral part of the political [architecture of security](#), the media's function in monitoring security institutions and helping the security practitioner make informed decisions regarding the security sector is critical. How do we craft effective strategies during times of war and terror when timely and impartial information is unavailable? Yet, credible and authoritative media voices face a greater threat to their ability to function effectively by the very institutions that they are meant to hold accountable.

The experience of media's power during the Vietnam War (known as the American War by those at the receiving end of the bombs) convinced political and military leaders worldwide that it was imperative to keep journalists under control. The observation that it took "a few [photographs](#) depicting the horrors of that conflict have done more to undermine the US effort than any three divisions of North Vietnamese regulars ever could...." forms the bedrock on which most governments universally deal with the media in times of conflict and terror. When political and military rhetoric reigns over reality and the media feeds nationalistic fervor with a disregard for facts, it inevitably leads to war or narrowing options for diplomatic negotiations. Truth, as the undying cliché goes, is the first casualty of war. Clichés, however musty, resurface across generations only because they contain eternal truths.

A similar approach to countering terrorism results in plentiful resources being misspent on fighting shadows when there should instead be focused efforts to address the legitimate grievances of groups that use illegitimate means to advertise the injustices against them.

If terrorism is theatre and publicity is indeed the oxygen of terrorism, it's no less the lifeline of governments, democracies and dictatorships alike, that feel haunted by an aggressive media. Propaganda is not the monopoly of enemies. Terrorists are only taking a page out of any self-respecting government's handbook of media management – define the enemy (by race, nationality, religion), present an opponent negatively, drum up support for a cause (using the flag, god, and anthem), influence public opinion and enlist support in their favor, hail their own moral superiority and frame the agenda to achieve their goals. "News," as a newspaper [magnate](#) astutely observed a century ago, "is something someone wants suppressed. Everything else is just advertising." The need to control the frame, therefore, sets governments on a warpath against journalists.

Governments cover up a lot of things, and they constantly look to distract the people from their failures. They most often use security as the reason for trampling fundamental freedoms and gagging the media. There is nothing unique or new in that. Throughout the world, from Russia to Colombia, journalists

continue to be incarcerated or killed in the [line of duty](#), both by states and non-state actors. Five of the ten most dangerous countries for media professionals are in the Asia-Pacific. In its ranking of the 2020 [press freedom index](#), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), while listing the oldest democracy to the largest democracy, at 35 and 140 respectively out of 180 countries, notes that the coming decade will be “a decisive decade for journalism, exacerbated by coronavirus.” Violence and threats are not the only tools used by states, which are becoming increasingly sophisticated in how they censor the media.

History, as the shrewd adage goes, is written by victors. And journalism is the first draft of history. Today’s Genghis Khans are those who can frame their agendas adroitly into rapidly believable spin and distractions. Those who wield the biggest megaphones, and command extensive networks of the devoted adept at the use of media technologies to control the narrative, are our new heroes.

For a security practitioner, the fallout of untimely and skewed information can be catastrophic. Why do you believe one is a rogue nation and the other is not? What caused you to believe the presence of WMDs in Iraq that led to a war? When were you first aware that yours is a superior country than your neighbors? How did you discover that X is a terrorist organization and that Y is a rebel group?

The Role of the Consumer in the Fog of (News) War: What do we do?

It’s best to start with the stark truth: We are a willing party to our [own deception](#). And societal safeguards cannot protect us from seeking that which we want. Innovations in news media technology, and a smartphone, has made a storyteller of us all. The current version of globalization seems to have made trade global and minds local. This has simultaneously led to the distortion in the cultural, political and social value of information and enables extreme behavior in us. Journalists look for facts to fit a set narrative and consumers seek out news that only suit their preferences. Never has the distrust of media run as high since then. Never has the consumer sunk as low in the pursuit of prurient curiosities.

We like news served to us with the least effort on our own part but now that we know the media is not living up to its responsibilities, shouldn’t we putting in the time to inform ourselves smartly? It requires giving up one desire for another, namely the wish to be spoon-fed versus our wish for impartial news. This further demands developing thinking strategies that empower us to safely steer through the morass of deceit, disinformation and din that confronts us 24/7.

[Critical thinking training](#) modules offer a broad array of tools none of which could be fully productive without the first and basic step: recognizing and accepting the biases that make us who we are. Social psychologists and media scholars, in their [classification](#) of nearly 200 types of analytical and emotional biases, have learnt that biases make us process information faster, especially during times of crisis, which often lead us to make far-reaching mistakes.

Indeed, there is none among us who does not recognize bias – in others. It is a curious fact that, as much as we recognize bias in others, we are smug in the belief of our own rationality. Clearly, since we are the ‘others’ when viewed by those across the table, it would be useful to acquaint ourselves with the [most prevalent biases](#).

There is much we could do to cultivate habits of mind that keep it open to the onslaught of information that assails us. Recognizing our tendency to gravitate toward sources of information that confirm our own set of beliefs, for instance. The coronavirus has laid bare another such tendency, forcefully - our inclination to believe one 'expert' over another. The 'expert' with the 'right' credentials, his manufactured-for-TV demeanor and therefore, the voice of authority, that makes us willing believers as against her whose self-confidence and [assured analysis](#) makes us uncomfortable because she is 'less' seasoned, from the 'wrong' background and credibly challenges conventional wisdom? Nothing could demonstrate this as sharply as the dominance of [manels \(all male panels\)](#) in this monstrous proliferation of webinars during the COVID era.

It is impossible to overstate the supreme importance of seeking information from diverse sources for a balanced understanding of our world. Relying largely on social media is as much an [impediment](#) to the effectiveness of a security practitioner as is seeking news to fit one's views. It's as important for professional development to regularly upskill by seeking out training to equip oneself with the knowledge to recognize forms of disinformation and media manipulation.

The pandemic may just be the inflection point in raising awareness and changing our habits of [collecting](#) and consuming news. A [study](#), by researchers at NYU's School of Global Public Health, found that people use six different sources, on average, to gather information about Covid-19. Another [survey](#) of six countries by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism on navigating the 'infodemic' found that a large majority of respondents felt the news media has "helped them to understand the crisis" and "explained how they can respond to it".

Clearly, the work of journalists still remains incredibly important and very much in demand. In what would be described as startling in normal times, American journalists are now [seeking advice](#) from the less developed world on how to cover an election. This recognition of the value of the media comes, ironically when the coronavirus is being described as a media extinction event. The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism [global survey](#) on Journalism and the Pandemic Project raises red flags for journalism in the COVID-19 era. A wrecked economy, low advertising revenue, job losses, new ways of collecting and disseminating news are all set to transform the business and practice of journalism more dramatically.

This, then, makes it a matter of great urgency for the security practitioner to hone skills on interpreting media and to tool up with a critical thinking kit. For that is what will decide, to a large degree, how effectively one navigates the clamorous landscape on the road ahead.

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