

“Terrorism – New Challenges & Media”

¹by Justice G.N. Ray

The seminar today is a solemn tribute to the spirit of India, the unity its people display in challenge and the fearlessness of the media in bringing information to its people. The Andhra Pradesh Press Academy, the APUWJ and Andhra University – Department of Journalism are worthy of praise for organizing this timely discussion on **Terrorism- New Challenges and Media**.

In the age of global terrorism being witnessed in 21st Century, the media today face significant challenges in defining their role and responsibility in the public sphere. Terrorism has changed from the hijacking and hostage taking situations through 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to the mindless suicide missions and the magnitude of such operations. Consequentially, the role of the media has to be changed, with the twin duty to give instantaneous global news in the context of vortex of alternative views leading to complex situations and to strike a balance between people’s right to know on the one side and national security and social ethics on the other.

Terrorist attacks destroy not only the soil and the people but also the ‘soul’ of the nation, tear its cultural fabric and simultaneously hamper its economic and political growth.

Media which is truly the mirror of the society and also plays the role of its leader, motivator and guide needs to gauge the situation and help the nation in rebuilding not only the structure but also the morale and psyche of a common man. It should refrain from lending even any unintentional advantage to the terrorists in terrorizing the society through gory, horrifying and scary visuals. **George W Bush** has rightly said ‘you **are with us or you are with the**

¹ Address by Mr. Justice G.N. Ray, Chairman, Press Council of India on “Terrorism – New Challenges & Media” on 3rd January 2009 organised by Press Academy of Andhra Pradesh in association with A.P. Union of Working Journalists & Andhra University (Journalism Department) at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Auditorium, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

terrorists'. Journalists are advised to keep away from what is called **Brigitte, L. Naco's** (2002) concept of '**mass-mediated terrorism**'.

It is true that in the mid to late 20th century, terrorists manipulated and exploited the media as a voice both to claim responsibility and make known their demands, as well as bringing attention to a specific cause. During the panel discussion on 'The Media and Terrorism: Friends or Foes' (international summit held on March 8-11 2005) the panelists were divided on the issue. While some argued that the journalists' only obligation was towards the reader, others stressed that it was important to deny the terrorists the 'oxygen of publicity'. Before discussing the role of the media in reporting terrorism, we must know what can be termed as 'terrorism'. The US department of State defines 'terrorism' to be 'premeditated politically-motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

The United Nations produced this definition in 1992: **"An anxiety – inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi) – clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets"**. This is the most commonly accepted academic definition.

Terrorism is a criminal act that influences an audience beyond the immediate victim. The strategy of terrorist is to commit acts of violence that draws the attention of the local populace, the government, and the world to their cause. The terrorists plan their attacks to obtain the greatest publicity, choosing targets that symbolize what they oppose. Thus the need to ensure that the journalist do not become a tool in the hands of the terrorists by giving them the desired publicity.

Different countries have tackled the issue differently. In **Australia**, laws are introduced to protect national security against terrorism. The Anti – Terrorism Act, introduced in 2005, went even further by reintroducing the crime

of sedition and expanding its potential use in Australia. The Australian Press Council in its 2007 Report, 'State of the News Print Media in Australia' was of the opinion by stating that Australia's sedition laws allow the government to restrict freedom of the press beyond what is necessary to combat terrorism. Even while the country has no specific media code that covers the ethical issues of reporting terrorism, Australian media goes for self-regulation. Noting that the public has a right to information on matters of public concern and to have the facts communicated to them, the Press Council of Australia felt that the best way to ensure that important information is disseminated to the public in a crisis situation is to establish relationship between media persons and the government officials and to provide media organisations with open and timely access to information so that they are not forced to rely on informal sources in order to establish the facts.

In United Kingdom, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has an exemplary set of reportage guidelines for 'War, Terror and Emergency'. BBC guidelines call for proper terror lexicon, avoidance of the term 'terrorist' and use of words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as "bomber", "attacker", "gunman", but "kidnapper", "insurgent, and "militant" instead. Since the attacks on the London Underground in July 2005, reporters are exhorted not to play with the emotions of the audiences by reporting on events in a sensational manner.

All UK broadcast services are under a duty not to broadcast anything that could incite or encourage crime.

United States of America: - The USA PATRIOT (United and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act instituted after 9/11 gives overriding powers to the Government and broad terms of this power mean that it can be used against practically anyone criticizing the US Administration's approach to combating terror.

Canada :- Canada's Article Ten of the Radio and television News Directors Association(RTND) of Canada's Code of Ethics says reporting of criminal

activities, such as hostage takings, will be done in a fashion that does not knowingly endanger lives, hamper attempts by authorities to conclude the events, offer comfort and support or provide information to the perpetrator(s). RTNDA members will not contact either the victim(s) or the perpetrator of a criminal activity during the course of the event, with the purpose of conducting an interview for broadcast. Canada's national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)'s Journalistic Standards and Practices say that "CBC journalists must ensure that any action they take will not further endanger the lives of hostage's release. They must guard against being used or manipulated by the terrorists/hostage takers".

Sensitive Reporting required

In the event of terrorist attack, media should refrain from giving sensational, exploitative and melodramatic reporting, a glimpse of which, we have witnessed during recent attack in Mumbai. Media should bear in mind that comment ***may be free but facts are sacred***. Expectations from the media are high whenever emergencies as witnessed in Mumbai occur. The role and the responsibility of the media is significant during such crisis. The need is to define and know the difference between information, curiosity and the rumour. The journalists have to be careful that the reporting does not create panic and fear amongst the countrymen and put the lives of the victims at risk and most important of all is not to feed strategic information to the terrorists' outfits through 'spot-reporting'. There is an urgent need for guidelines for journalists for their role during such incidents. The Press Council has issued guidelines for emergent situations developing on account of insurgency when such situations developed in Punjab, Kashmir and North eastern states. But since operations by the terrorists are changing and magnitude and intricacies of the operational tactics of the terrorists are mind boggling, there is need for Seminars and discussions with all the stakeholders to evolve more effective guidelines and the Press Council of India is contemplating to hold such dialogues in future.

In print media the journalists can afford to analyse and report at length, but electronic media reporters with live coverage facility at their command, have to draw the line themselves on the spot because once any damage is caused on account of insensitive coverage, the mischief may be enormous and cannot be rectified.

The electronic media, particularly the channels which formed News Broadcasters Association (NBA) have recently come out with a set of guidelines for self regulation by indicating that they had not foreseen this type of unprecedented situation. Though we appreciate the care taken after the NBA circulated the guidelines and need for restraint, much damage had already been done. We all hope to be wiser in future if such unfortunate events repeat themselves.

Media reporting also needs to show greater sensitivity in handling the exhausted and traumatized victims. It is more often than not that exhibition of mangled bodies creates deep shock and trauma to the viewers.

Supreme Court of India's observation that 'Freedom of the Press is subject to reasonable restrictions enumerated in Article 19(2) of the Constitutions where sovereignty, integrity and the security of the country are concerned' can not be lost sight of.

We must also not overlook the positive side of the coverage. Media through its reporting brought into light the lapses into our security system and inadequate arrangements of the government in handling such serious situations. We must agree that there should be some 'Lakshman Rekha' or guidelines for reporting during such events.

Reacting on media's role in Mumbai attack, Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions said in its reports, "The live footage shown by television channels could have been used as free intelligence input by the perpetrators sitting far away, who allegedly guided the attackers through satellite mobile phone." The channels failed to self regulate. Committee further said. "Self-regulation is an ideal situation, but it may not be effective to regulate the media, particularly in

the scenario of growing competition among the channels for supremacy in business of rating.” The committee asked the government to put in place Broadcasting Regulatory Authority under an Act of Parliament.

Reporters must realize that it is only the unrestrained reporting which has invited the government to intervene and define the limits to the press freedom.

In the wake of criticism of the role of the media, especially the electronic media, India’s broadcasting bodies have brought out easy to recall self-regulatory guidelines: -

Dos & Don'ts

- Don't give live coverage of hostage crises
- Block information that may help terrorists
- Don't disclose details of hostages; withhold sensitive information on rescue operations.
- Avoid live contact with victims and with security personnel engaged in rescue operations in 26/11-like situations
- Avoid unnecessary repetition of archival footage which may agitate the minds of viewers

However, not much satisfied with the voluntary media code adopted by News Broadcasters Association (NBA), the Ministry Information & broadcasting is working out mechanism to supply 'authorized footage' for broadcast during crisis management towards ensuring 'careful coverage, not hampering rescue and counter operations.

I invite journalists both from print as well as the electronic media for self-introspection and help in building a strong nation and the society wherein there is no place for hatred by denying the perpetrators of terror the oxygen of publicity to defeat the very aim of the terrorists that is to spread hate, terror, violence and disharmony.

Television News is for Reel
by Chitra Padmanabhan
The Hindu (2.1.2009)

That is why it is somewhat unnerving to think that what we earmark as news and information and 'reality' could be television's flight of fantasy extracting the seed of emotion from a human dilemma and converting to spectacle to be viewed vicariously and not with concern.

The debate generated around the television coverage of the Mumbai attack is a watershed in a sense, for it has prompted reflection in some quarters. Time will tell whether the television camera corrects its retreat from journalistic conventions or tilts completely towards the hyper mould of the reality show, adding to it aspects of film at will for untold entertainment.

The frame of reality was never so tensions.