

The context behind the media crisis

By Siddhartha

(This is a brief introduction to the workshop on the media organised by Pipal Tree through its print-media programme, The Transforming Word. The workshop took place in Bangalore between 10-12 December 1999.)

What follows are some reflections on the social, political and commercial undercurrents that impinge on the media today, either enabling it to obfuscate the real issues and problems that confront our era or to highlight them.

For some the millenium is the year 2000, for others 2001. The 2000 celebrations were extravagant. Millions of champagne bottles popped in celebration, while billions of others woke up to their usual worries about food, health, education and shelter. Worries that the poor are fairly accustomed to, as Auden would have said. Yet we are witnessing a world of extraordinary advances in communication technology and unparalleled wealth for a few. Somebody recently stated that Bill Gates is rich enough to buy up forty of the poorest countries in the world. Ward Morehouse, the president of the Council for International relations in New York, says that a single corporation like Mitsubishi has an annual turnover equivalent to the GNP of India, a country with almost a billion people.

In response to the precarious nature of globalisation a Latin American friend offered this paradox. Half the people of his country, he said, could not sleep at night because they were hungry and the other half did not sleep because they were afraid. The rich are now barricading themselves against the 'criminal' activities of the poor. The expression 'gated cities' has gained currency to denote the security systems in place to ward off potential invasions by the disinherited. On the ecological front things have reached their limits. A United Nations report says that the per capita availability of water has gone down by fifty percent in the last twenty years and will go down a further 50% in the next twenty years. From all accounts we are already on the brink or hurtling towards it.

Its always difficult to know what words, what feelings and what interventions are relevant in a world where most of us feel increasingly powerless, where liberal democratic institutions are used to hasten the concentration of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands. If old style social analysis is not fashionable anymore what tools do we use to analyse the present situation. At least things seemed clear earlier on, where we knew that the ruling elites needed to manufacture ideological consent to keep the system going. Where we knew that the coercive mechanisms of the state, like the military, the police and the legal system, were to be used in case the ideological apparatus floundered and was unable to contain the tensions. But today there is a massive effort worldwide to justify market driven democracy with little space provided for critical rethinking. The big peddlers of globe-baloney like Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner and their smaller counterparts in South Asia see the media as another economic enterprise with rich pickings, provided the content and the packaging are seductively displayed. To grow and prosper further they cannot afford to alienate those who provide them advertisement

revenue. All this may be old hat to us and yet we cannot afford to sidestep the predicament on the grounds that we are not sure if there is anything to be done. Sadanand Menon has referred to this phenomenon as candyfloss journalism and Sasi Kumar, in one of his papers, cites Jon Tusa, the former head of BBC, to show the narrowing down of freedoms. Tusa points out that today's journalism has " more choice, but less diversity; more information but less knowledge; more action but less news; more gratification but less satisfaction; more viewers but fewer audiences; more entertainment but less engagement; more immediacy but less depth," and so on.

Objective, responsible and compassionate journalism is now rare, and journalists with integrity are sidelined or forced to quit. Yet there are valiant exceptions. The Hindu newspaper is a case in point. The presence of Nirmala Lakshman, Joint Editor of the Hindu, at the workshop underscores the paper's commitment to responsible journalism. Whether it be issues related to women or dalits or communalism the Hindu has shown that it is possible to comment on the facts as they are and still matter on the circulation graphs. Rajib Sarkar of the Indian Express group has turned a glossy like Gentleman into a socially sensitive one, without giving up the niche of a "man's magazine". An alternative magazine like Humanscape is remarkable for both its seriousness and professionalism. What would some of us do without Humanscape's incisive articles, month after month, offering us the best and the brightest of alternative comment. India would be the poorer without this courageous journal.

To return to the 'manufactured consent' that we find ourselves in, what tools do we have to demystify this reality? Is it enough to state that we have no alternatives to globalisation and therefore the best we can do is to make the process more humane through struggles to defend human rights. Or do we insist that we are witnessing behavioral and attitudinal mutations that make the human being less compassionate and more lonely, manipulated by the information and consumer society. Not everybody is equally enmeshed in this phenomenon, however. Large sections of people are busy keeping their heads above water to meet the basic requirements of food clothing and shelter to worry too much about the hidden persuaders. But even the poor are fed dreams of becoming rich, and in the absence of meaningful political discourse and social movements, they often have little possibility to solve their problems and often resort to bravado acts of violence, that the system is more than happy to classify as 'criminal'. This is certainly the case in cities like Rio and Sao Paulo in Brazil, and the trend is likely to engulf South Asia as well unless the media and other agents educate people to critically reflect on the real structural causes of their poverty and cultural alienation. In reality the media is doing much less of all this now compared to previous times. Rocking the boat is not what the media wishes if the cost is losing government and corporate revenue. The NGO community, which in earlier times promoted critical awareness and interacted creatively with the media, is now largely immersed in pragmatic approaches like micro-credit and other development activities. Much of NGO work is donor driven. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern block, communism has ceased to be a threat and donors do not anymore see the need to shore up alternatives by supporting soft radical approaches like, for example, Paulo Freire's conscientisation.

Is class analysis dead? Is social democracy the way out to bring in a measure of justice and decency to public life? Going by the performance of Tony Blair, the current icon of social democracy, there is little cause for hope, for he has made social democracy the motor of neo-liberalism. Civil society is today another buzzword in many quarters. The way ahead, the argument goes, is for citizens to empower themselves through local associations and pressure groups. The more groups and associations there are the more vibrant the democratic process. Upto now too much attention has been placed on political leadership, governments and the private sector for the development and functioning of our social institutions. It is time that civil society came to the fore, for without that democracy would hardly mean much. Or so the reasoning goes. While there is considerable truth in this line of reasoning the de-emphasising of the state may unwittingly play into the hands of the transnational corporations who are bent on weakening the state and grabbing unbridled power. In many parts of the world the nation state exists only in name. The media has already blurred cultural distinctions by creating a homogenised 'global culture' that has further served to weaken the nation state, just what the WTO and transnational corporations need to allow unfettered access to markets. The nation state must eventually go, but not at the behest of the transnationals. (The twenty-first century is left with no choice but to cautiously move towards some form of global governance which simultaneously respects diversities.)

In the more prosperous countries 'deep ecological' movements are emerging which insist that the root of all problems lies in giving primacy to the human species. According to them, human beings are only ten seconds old on the geological clock, far far younger than even the despised cockroaches. More to the point they insist that there must be a balance in nature between all species, and that human beings have far exceeded their limit. The radical ecologists insist that vast areas of the earth must be left as wilderness if we are to have a future at all. While there is some truth in this argument, it comes primarily from the richer countries, which in any case have small populations.

The grand old anarchist of this century, Mahatma Gandhi, seems increasingly relevant for 2000 and beyond for his advocacy of simple sustainable lifestyles. But Gandhism succeeds only if inner spiritual spaces are nurtured. These spiritual spaces may serve to powerfully resist the external world of consumer seduction. Sadly, the shrinking of these inner spaces is a disease of late modernity.

Most of us present at the media workshop were, in one way or other, concerned with shaping public opinion on social issues. Despite the odds against a more open media we still continued with our particular crusades. Speaking for myself, I have often asked why I persist with it. The answer is clear: I am in it not because I do not know what else to do, but because I believe that, with all my contradictions, I am doing things I largely believe in; or, should I say, somewhat believe in. I think this would probably be true of many of us in this room. I am certainly doing things without hugely oppressing myself and without an entirely altruistic purpose in mind. For I also matter and my convictions cannot flourish without my creative wellbeing. As Chief Seattle said, all things are connected. And the wellbeing of others must somehow be connected with our own wellbeing. Words, the use of language and the visual image have the potential to take me

to big highs and incredible lows. I am grateful for the highs and lows. When one likes doing what one is doing it is easier to keep going, whether or not one sees light at the end of the tunnel. Nishkama Karma, as Gandhi would put it. Action without attachment to the fruits of one's action. The workshop partly dwelt on this personal side of resistance, which is both dissenting and celebratory in nature. This was important, for we are all human beings motivated by the convictions and ambiguities we experience around us. It is not only ideology that motivates us, but compassion as well. And life in all its adventure and paradox. Which is why we don't crumble when our ideologies do.

If we all met in Bangalore through the Transforming Word-Pipal Tree programme it was in the hope that we could modestly, and collectively, help each other out. Perhaps we would hear words and experiences that might resonate within us, both personally and socially. We had hoped to mine a few nuggets that could give us some clarity, at least provisional. Thankfully we were not disappointed and the modest expectations were reached. Even if we did not go away with certainties we had enriched ourselves with stories of personal struggles and creativity. We were comforted that the struggles that took shape through our writings, films and other efforts at communication were not only social but also personal. For even the least of our efforts, when they carried some conviction, led us from one small hope to another. This was the era of small hopes and little nirvanas where the effort and fulfillment were as important as the intended results. In hindsight the century did not close with a whimper as far as we were concerned. The WTO fiasco in Seattle showed that things were far from being lost. As the French philosopher Edgar Morin put it, "The twenty-first century began with Seattle." Thomas Kocherry of the fishworkers federation was in Seattle during the protests. He said, "If the twentieth century will be remembered for de-colonisation then the twenty-first century bids fair to free us from the shackles of the transnational corporations." We look ahead with hope. The human spirit cannot be overpowered by the might of the transnationals or by the sophistry of the 'candyfloss' media.

When this workshop was conceived it was part of a series dealing with combating communalism. Pipal Tree has been significantly involved with building bridges between communities, working with peace committees in communally sensitive areas of the city, and networking with activists in other parts of the country and the world. But as far as this meeting was concerned we realised that we needed to broaden the scope and look at the gamut of hurdles and potentialities when intervening through the media, not only on issues pertaining to communalism, but on all alternative issues. We initially drew up a programme and then realised that every participant present was herself/himself a resource person and we would be unfair if we privileged only a few speakers. The way out of the dilemma was to build a creative programme collectively and ensure that each one got time to contribute.

Based on discussions with the participants we considered the following areas:

1. Understanding the present trends of commercialisation in the media.
2. The implications of these trends to the democratic process.

3. The interventions we make in fighting communalism, supporting environmental issues, human rights etc.
4. What 'intervention' mean to us in a personal and creative sense.
5. The spaces available in the mainstream media, in alternative possibilities, on the net etc.

A short report of this workshop appears in the contribution of Cheriyan Alexander. Some of the papers that follow in this issue of Humanscape were presented at the workshop and others were written incorporating the discussions that took place at the workshop.

(Siddhartha is a member of **The International Alliance of Journalists**.)