

**Diplomacy and the News Media:  
A Comment on the Indian Experience**

*Ajai K. Rai*

**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to examine the changing dynamics of the interface between diplomacy and news media with emphasis on the Indian context. American examples, opinions and trends have been taken into consideration to impart a comparative perspective to the paper. It has been carried out in the light of the brief history of diplomatic reporting in India, the linkages and issues involved in the relationship between the Indian Foreign Office and media as well as the role and limitations of television in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy.*

*The dominant theme of the paper is that, despite the emerging role of media in diplomacy, the media-diplomacy relationship has been quite uncomfortable over the years.*

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**Introduction**

In the recent months, nothing could have been a more definitive pointer to the vastly changed times, so far as media and diplomacy are concerned than the appointment of Charlotte Beers within weeks of September 11, 2001 as Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Celebrated as the 'queen of branding' among the public relations cognoscenti, her job is one of explaining and selling the Bush administration's foreign policy, especially its war on terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Beers' efforts to mount the largest public relations campaign in the history of foreign policy, with a Congressional appropriation of \$ 520 million, will focus on 'disaffected populations' in the Middle-East and South Asia. And these endeavours will be guided by the best canons of advertising: to convey in the emotional as well as the rational, frame all messages in the context of the audience, enlist third parties for authenticity and magnify a good result.

No country has developed as close a link between statesmanship and salesmanship as the United States. Public relations have been a staple of American diplomacy starting in the First World War and 'perfected' during

the Cold War. It is part of a mix that combines advertising with foreign aid, cultural exchanges and wide-ranging consular contacts.

In the tranquil days before the First World War, traditional diplomacy was highly formal, interpersonal, slow, and usually protected by secrecy.<sup>2</sup> In his famous 'Fourteen Points' speech of 1918, President Woodrow Wilson advocated 'open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view'.<sup>3</sup> It heralded what came to be known as the 'new diplomacy'. This was primarily associated with exposing diplomacy to the media, public opinion and direct and unmediated conduct of negotiations by politicians and high-ranking officials, including heads of state and ministers.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of whether such exposure is beneficial or not has been a subject of much debate but it is undeniable that it has become a permanent and irreversible feature of international negotiations. Abba Eban has argued that "nothing has done more to revolutionize the diplomatic craft than the current vogue of persistent media attention...[and] there is no way of putting the clock back to an era in which negotiations were sheltered from domestic constituencies".<sup>5</sup> Ross Perot has said that, "Embassies are relics of the days of sailing ships. At one time, when you had no world communication, your ambassador spoke for you in that country. But now, with instantaneous communication around the world, the ambassador is primarily in a social role."<sup>6</sup>

Inter-related changes in politics, international relations and mass communication have greatly expanded the media's role in diplomacy. The revolution in communication and information technologies, the capability to broadcast - often live - almost every significant development in world events to almost every place on the globe and the creation and expansion of the Internet have led to the globalization of electronic journalism and to worldwide growth in networks, stations and communications.

These revolutionary changes have altered the meaning of power in contemporary world politics. It is a nation's or leader's image and ability to control information flow, not just their military and economic power, that helps determine status in the international community. "In a rapidly changing world", wrote Nye and Owens "information about what is occurring becomes a central commodity of international relations, just as the threat and use of military force was seen as the central power resource in an international system overshadowed by the potential clash of superpowers".<sup>7</sup> The mass media, global television in particular, have become a central source of information about world affairs. As Hamid Mowlana has suggested, "The technologies and institutions of communication that have become so central to world politics and economics over the past couple of decades have fundamentally altered the nature and sources of power and influence, both domestically and internationally."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Kalb has concluded that, "Indeed, only the foolish foreign leader can any longer afford to underestimate the power of TV news."<sup>9</sup>

Politicians and journalists have suggested that the convergence of revolutionary changes in politics and communication has created a new media-dominated governing system. Lugar has called this system 'medialism' and Gergen has referred to it as 'teledemocracy'.<sup>10</sup> A few observers have suggested that this transformation in media power has created a new phenomenon in foreign relations, known as the 'CNN (Cable News Network) effect', whereby-primarily in crises involving the possibility of humanitarian intervention-officials have lost control over decision-making to global television.<sup>11</sup>

These fundamental changes in diplomacy, politics and global communication have created new modes of interaction between media and diplomacy. In turn, there has been an effort to coin phrases that capture the new role of the global media-television in particular-in diplomacy: hence media diplomacy, teleplomacy, photoplomacy, soundbite diplomacy, instant diplomacy and real-time diplomacy.

## **The Limits of TV in Foreign Policy**

Television has its limitations. Although scholars have only recently begun to appreciate it, television is in fact a highly 'deceptive' medium. At the basic level, the obvious needs to be reiterated: television cameras can only 'see' what they are pointed at. They provide, at best, mere snapshots of reality and, at worst, illusions of reality. For, we are dealing with what is primarily a picture-driven medium that requires certain fundamental preconditions for it to operate effectively. These range from the ability of the camera operators literally to turn on his camera (requiring electrical power) at the right time (requiring judgment, experience, light and luck) to capture the right sort of events from the best possible angle. What goes on behind the camera operator's back or when the camera is turned off does not constitute part of the visual record. When the right combination of these exacting circumstances comes together, there is the chance that the pictures might form the basis of a story for eventual transmission to a wider public-provided they can be sent home successfully with the necessary equipment working and the satellite time booked. But the process does not end there. For news gathering, like diplomacy, is indeed a process requiring a team of professional individuals making judgments about the available pictures prior to them ever being seen by an audience. In other words, they are editorialised until they are whipped into a comprehensible story. Depending upon the nature of the target audience, that story may be told in differing editorial styles. It promotes accusations that on many commercial, advertising-driven stations, news stories are determined more for their entertainment value than for information purposes ('infotainment'). More serious reporters try to combat this by editing their packages in the field-which again is easier to do now, thanks to portable equipment and 'multi-tasking' within the broadcasting industry.

But whether in the field or back at the base, some pictures may still be omitted on grounds of 'taste and decency.' During the Gulf War of 1991, for example, close-up pictures of the horribly burned remains of women and children killed in the bombing of the Al Firdos installation in the Al-Amiriya

suburb of Baghdad were omitted ('self-censored') by some Western broadcasters for the same reason that they would not use similar pictures of the victims of a plane crash.

Moreover, when all the decisions have been made, often at great speed in order to meet the transmission deadlines of news bulletins, there is the frequently overlooked problem of how individual members of a mass audience perceive the end result. We all too often forget that mass audiences consist of individuals. Hence the pictures may be common to all, but each individual will perceive them differently according to his or her particular background, education, gender, sensibilities, judgment, perceptions and prejudices. Thus, there is the twin process of what psychologists term 'cognitive dissonance' taking place, by the media professionals themselves, and then, subsequently, by the audience.

When television does manage to cover a story that is unpalatable to those in authority-such as the hijacking of IC 814 to Kandhar-there is a disingenuous tendency to shoot the messenger. The Indian government blamed the private satellite channels, particularly Star and Zee, of pressurizing it to 'do something' by giving unduly extensive coverage to the incident and highlighting the anxiety and resentment of the kin of hijacked passengers. Similarly, during the Agra Summit, Prannoy Roy of NDTV was branded 'anti-national' for having scored a first by telecasting Pervez Musharraf's informal breakfast meeting with Indian editors. It is disingenuous because blaming the medium for the message it carries deflects attention away from the story itself but it disguises fears about the impact which the message may have on the general public. In the Gulf War the fear was that by showing pictures (even sanitised ones) of what modern weapons can do to people, audiences might be sufficiently shocked into doing something to stop the war.

As regards TV's impact on the business of government, it can serve as an occasional catalyst in foreign policy-but only when politicians allow it to do so. Operation 'Restore Hope' failed essentially because American forces on a humanitarian mission turned it into a manhunt for General Aided.

Nonetheless, Boutros Boutros-Ghali's view is that "Today, the media do not simply report the news. Television has become a part of the event it covers. It has changed the way the world reacts to crisis."<sup>12</sup> "We are under no pressure to do something about crises that are not on TV", one British official has admitted.<sup>13</sup> Yet, if it is difficult enough for psychologists to establish a direct causal link between television and human behaviour, how can we talk with certainty of a 'do something factor'? One might only conclude that television's 'power' to set the agenda is determined more by those taking notice of it-or who are afraid of it, or who are willing to grant access to it-than it is by any inherent qualities which it may possess as an instrument of mass communication and persuasion. There is more evidence that such people are more likely to be the politicians and the officials in the audience than members of the general public at large.

Nik Gowing has said that, "Officials confirm that information often comes to them first from television or text news services well before official diplomatic and military communications channels can provide data, precision, clarification and context".<sup>14</sup> US President Bush even went so far as to say: "I learn more from CNN than I do from the CIA."<sup>15</sup>

By now it is a truism of the modern age of politics that no event is really important or worthy of attention unless the network anchors are personally there to cover it. The presence of anchors assures airtime as well as a sense of pomp and theatre that world leaders simply cannot resist. By playing to the cameras, they play not only to their own people but also to a global audience-quite literally to hundreds of millions of people at the same time. If they have a message, and they want to sell it, the anchors are there to provide a gallery packed with potential buyers. The competitive struggle for an exclusive foot of tape or an interview is fierce and journalistic standards are sometimes sacrificed on the altar of TV ratings or front-page ambitions. It was a coup for CBS when Dan Rather was in Tiananmen Square to cover the massacre of Chinese students, even more of a coup for NBC when Tom Brokaw was in Berlin at the time the Wall collapsed.

Another truism is that because of new technology, global politics has also become local<sup>16</sup> while there are correspondents based abroad. The genre known as 'foreign correspondents' is fast becoming extinct. His or her brand of expertise is now the property of the good generalist or the ubiquitous anchor.

### **Changing Paradigms of Media-Diplomacy Dynamics**

The growth in the reach and influence of the media has brought about radical changes in the processes of formulating and conducting foreign policy. Diplomacy, a profession whose *raison d'être* was action behind the scenes, discretion and even secrecy, confronts a transformation in the ground rules. It becomes the willing partner, even a manipulator of the media. At major events like large conferences or bilateral summits, diplomacy almost becomes synonymous with spin-doctors utilizing the media to project partisan perspectives that mould public opinion. Often they influence the event itself.

As R.O.Keohane and J.S. Nye have suggested, it is not so much the increase in 'message velocity' which marks out the present era since the leap in the speed of communications occurred in the 19th century.<sup>17</sup> Rather it is 'institutional velocity', the intensity of interactions (or the 'thickness' of globalism) and the response of actors that marks out the present era.

With information moving faster and wider, government officials are often tempted to respond precipitously to accommodate the artificial pressure of media deadlines-before reliable information has been gathered, its implications assessed, and the appropriate policy devised and agreed upon. The former spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, Nirupama Rao says, "Now the emphasis is more on effective communication. One is required to be instantly responsive."<sup>18</sup> She adds, "My job is all about lights, camera and action. Television has made my job tougher. Now, I require high energy levels and demonstrational patience to pacify the media's curiosity."

The ability to respond speedily to the ever-quickening flow of events is reflected in the organisation and operation of national diplomatic systems. 'Virtual diplomacy' has become a buzzword within diplomatic circles like globalization itself-and is used with commensurate imprecision. At its most general level, it relates to the application of communication and information technologies (CIT) to diplomacy. More specifically, it has had two impacts on the organisation of diplomacy: first, to enable the establishment of 'virtual embassies'-perhaps no more than a laptop, modem and satellite phone in a hotel room-as several countries did in the course of the Bosnian conflict.<sup>19</sup> Second, CIT has reconfigured the relationships between foreign ministries and overseas missions, giving the latter a more direct role in the formulation of policy.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, acknowledging this influence is a far cry from suggesting that the media also determine the substance of policy or even dominate the process that shapes policy. That this would be the case should come as no surprise. A presumption of credibility ordinarily gives the government the benefit of doubt in foreign policy. Similarly, the government's monopoly on secret intelligence and classified information, which it can release as it sees fit, leaves it with the presumption of authority that press reports alone cannot easily overcome.

Of course, the phenomenon of 'medialism' produces ever large streams of less and less filtered information that cross national boundaries. Leaders of all nations can appeal directly to constituencies in other countries: words are used to provide a 'spin' that breaks down institutional and governmental controls; images are superimposed on those cultivated by local governments; and leaks from authorised or unauthorised sources expose transactions otherwise carefully concealed or disguised. The effect is to introduce new and often unpredictable forces into the policy process.

Be that as it may, the media-diplomacy relationship remains uneasy. In a democracy, the home media suspect official agencies of wanting to manipulate them and orient reportage in a way that suits the time or the issue. In relation to international affairs, 'inconvenient' reportage is



unwelcome as is premature publicity for events that are in the pipeline. Shades of national solidarity and patriotism can also be invoked on major issues. Each needs the other, but on its own terms. With the foreign media such a nationalist nexus does not exist and the level of caution on their side in relationship with another country's government or embassy is that much higher.

In the Indian context, this uneasiness has been a significant but disturbing trend right since the inception of links between the media and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and through the history of diplomatic reporting since independence.

### **MEA and the Indian Media**

In the 1950s, soon after the inception of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), a separate Indian Information Service (IIS) was created, consisting of journalists and others directly recruited from the profession. This experiment deviated from the concept of integrated services. In the assessment of the decision-makers in the years that followed, it evidently did not work well. This could have been on account of poor selection or because a subsidiary service did not sit well with the IFS. The Pillai Committee recommended in 1966 that, "information work should be done by Foreign Service officers themselves." It was gradually merged with the Foreign Service and the last members of the old IIS cadre retired many years back, several having served as Ambassadors. It perhaps proved the adage that making of another profession with the civil service produces a hybrid with the worst characteristics of both. Since then, information work has been treated as an integral mainstream activity, as in most other diplomatic services.

From the inception of MEA, the External Publicity Division (known as XP Division) has been the key unit and has been headed by IFS officers, several of whom went on to become Foreign Secretaries. It enjoys a generous share of material and manpower resources; and a good degree of autonomy. The XP Division has also grown to a size where it is virtually

unmanageable by the single Joint Secretary who heads it. This has long been understood, but each time the subject of redistributing the work to at least two officials of that rank comes up, issues of turf and ego come in the way of a rational decision.

### **Diplomatic Reporting in India**

Diplomatic reporting in this country is purely a post-independence phenomenon. Until shortly after the Second World War, India's foreign and security policies were made in distant London.

These were esoteric matters for the handful of newspapers that existed then. Only two issues on the fringes of foreign policy evoked emotion and even excitement in the Central Assembly and in the national Press. One was the plight of the Indian diaspora, more particularly that of the people of Indian origin in South Africa who were victims of apartheid. The other issue was the frequent bombing of Waziristan, the areas of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). India's independence and the advent of Jawaharlal Nehru changed all that. Kept aloof by the British, under Nehru started playing an activist role on the world stage from the word go. According to veteran columnist Inder Malhotra, <sup>21</sup> "Under the circumstances, it should be no surprise that coverage of Indian foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives by Indian newspapers and journals through the first decade of independence had turned into a long affair with Nehru." Foreign Policy had a pride of place in his daily speeches in which he tried to educate the masses in the intricacies of international affairs. Unlike in recent years, foreign policy was discussed in every session of Parliament and always 'approved' by the two houses with acclamation.

Nehru's stewardship of the Ministry of External Affairs lent the profession of diplomacy a touch of glamour. However, it fostered in the conglomeration of Indian diplomats a certain aloofness and arrogance. Even the most senior of them contributed little to the making of foreign policy for the simple reason that the system functioned on the conviction of the belief that 'Panditji Knows Best'. This did not evoke much criticism from

the small band of senior and experienced correspondents who alone were assigned the privileged task of reporting and commenting on the conduct of international relations. South Block's word was generally accepted. Indeed, how could one doubt it when India was getting kudos for its peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts in Korea, Indochina, Congo, et al?

The 'affair' between Nehru and the chroniclers of Indian diplomacy soured over time. Of the various reasons, two stood out. The first was the growing unhappiness among large sections of Indians over Nehru's failure to resolve the Kashmir issue and overcome the costly India-Pakistan hostility. The second and the more powerful was the U-turn in India-China relations towards the end of the 1950s. The bogus brotherhood had turned into bitter hostility after the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet and the grant of asylum to him in this country. The bitterness then degenerated into the brief but brutal border war with China in 1962.

Nehru and V.K. Krishna Menon, together with some of their favoured Generals, did pay a heavy price for the collapse of India's China policy. But the press was not free from blame. It went on supporting the 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' refrain of containing China through friendliness for as long as it was popular. When things went wrong, writers on foreign policy pulled out all stops and started a virulent anti-China campaign that made it virtually impossible to arrive at any compromise of the kind Zhou en Lai proposed to Nehru at their last meeting in New Delhi in April 1960.

Another tendency in foreign affairs reporting that took roots and persists to this day is the almost religious belief that every foreign visit of the Prime Minister/Foreign Minister is a resounding success. Reality is often just the opposite, Nehru's own disastrous visit to the United States during the Kennedy presidency in November 1961 is an instance in point.

No Prime Minister has been lauded so profusely-and with justification-as Indira Gandhi was for her handling of the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh and the delicate pre-war diplomacy. But by polarizing almost every aspect of Indian politics and public life, she also saw to it that any

comment on foreign policy also got sharply divided into two-gushing or trenchant. This problem persists. "Ideology and individual bias of reporters and commentators rather than facts tend to dictate what appears in print or is aired. As in other spheres, so in diplomatic reporting, comment is becoming more and more sacred and facts more and more free," laments Malhotra.<sup>22</sup>

### **Projecting Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad: Issues**

*Issue of uneasy relationship between the Indian media and the foreign policy establishment:* It would not be proper to say that the establishment is entirely to be blamed for this relationship. The press too, or a section of the press, has shown a degree of irresponsibility at times. There have been vague quotes from people, unnamed sources. We do not know who the sources are who ascribe views different from those of the MEA. There has even been a degree of misinformation, even distortion.

The press also gets caught up in the internal politics of MEA. The players inside the MEA also use journalists. Reporting on policy matters suffers as the media gets caught up in the personalities inside the establishment as to who is going where and who is going to be posted where, who is going to be the new foreign secretary, etc. That is the time when the press gets into some kind of personality reporting, misinformation takes place and one lobby is planting stories against the other. The press is guilty sometimes of carrying one lobby against the other. In the interest of credibility of the press some note has to be taken of this aspect.

"The MEA side should equally acknowledge that we have been playing games, trying to plant stories", conceded Salman Haider, former Foreign Secretary.<sup>23</sup> And unfortunately, these plants are taken up and after a while the whole focus shifts. That stories which are ostensibly about issues are really about personalities. Haider further states, "This is extremely deplorable. And I think much tighter editorial control is necessary. To bring correspondents in line, because those who are drifting around the wrong part of the corridor and coming with those little juicy titbits need not be given

that much column space that they are given and certainly MEA must put its own house in order. Which is not an easy thing to do."

The main responsibility remains, however, with the foreign policy establishment by which I mean from the minister downwards, not just the individuals in-between. And certainly not the more junior ones.

In this context, a few things need to be underlined. Firstly, the MEA needs to bring about appropriate institutional changes. The spokesperson or the person directly responsible for dealing with the media, for instance, is not accorded particular seniority in the establishment. He or she is just a post office, and obviously does not participate in the decision-making process. There is a new culture after 1983 or so, wherein the JS (XP) is not taken as a player in the mainstream of happenings. The JS (XP) is treated as a 'supernumerary', not taken to be an equal member of the team. So, he/she does not have the whole picture. Therefore, when he/she is questioned or when asked by the media to explain, he/she is not able to go beyond the brief which can be very embarrassing for him/her at times. For much of the time he/she is in the dark about decisions at higher levels and therefore, tends to be somewhat defensive when required to elucidate decisions or clear doubts.

Vinod Mehta, Editor, Outlook, during his trip to Paris, as part of Prime Minister I.K.Gujral's delegation, found to his 'amazement' that the person who was briefing the media about the meeting the PM had with the Pope, had to say that the two met and shook hands and said to each other, "It is a lovely day."<sup>24</sup> He was queried what else happened. "I don't know. I wasn't there." And this was Gujral meeting the Pope after Mother Teresa's death in Kolkata. This would have merited a lot of copy.

As mentioned above, the spokesman should have access to information and should be within the decision-making circle. Former MEA spokesman, Pavan Verma finds it somewhat difficult to define as to what constitutes the 'decision-making circle'. "Because I think what is really important is that the spokesman should have access to information at the highest level should

he need to have it for purposes of his job. There is just no way I think a system can be structured where a spokesman is a participant at all decision-making levels, or at all media events, which need to be projected. So, it is a question of saying that he has access to information which is useful as also the background to an event so that he can go beyond merely the briefing that he has to project without going beyond the brief in terms of privileged information."<sup>25</sup>

The view that the JS (XP) has no role in decision-making is held by the former Foreign Secretary, J.N. Dixit.<sup>26</sup> Whether it is foreign policy or domestic policy, the publicity officer, he feels, has the right to tell the government the implications of a policy in terms of the impact on the public opinion. The spokespersons also have a task of educating the government what the press wants, what the press needs. What are the motivations that would generate questions from the press? The duty of JS (XP) is not just briefing the press. It is a very crucial role that the publicity officer plays in being an interlocutor between the establishment and the Press.

Contrast this with the practice in the US. The spokesman participates in the foreign office daily morning meetings at the top level. He does not merely listen, but he advises on matters of timing, phraseology, what will make news, how to do it, how to put it across. These are essential when you are dealing with the media. However, our establishment is not particularly concerned on these aspects of putting across its point of view.

The American experience is certainly more challenging because their spokesmen are of different kind. At different times they have been members of the inner circle. We have had situations here when the PM has chosen sometimes a distinguished editor, someone from the media, to be part of his or her inner media group comprising, senior officials within the PMO. This experience should be assessed, at its good and bad points. Editors or other senior journalists don't necessarily make the best spokespersons. They have an understanding of the media, which is essential. But how do they bridge that particular gap? It is very difficult. It has a lot to do with the character of the chief, the ability of the person in charge, to draw into his or

her confidence, the individual who will actually go and speak, to justify or present that policy. "We all had this problem that we are given a brief and then we do our best to try and put it across the media with different degrees of success", according to Mr. Haider.

The British, more often than we do, use the dealing senior level officer level to brief the press. For example, the same Gore Booth who had been the recipient of a great deal of attention in Britain during the Gulf War was the Assistant Secretary, in charge of the Middle-East. He was actually aware of policy evolution and he was the man who was doing the policy briefing to good effect.

As there is surely no other active or large foreign ministry where the normally full-time job of official spokesman on foreign affairs is combined with the equally full-time occupation of handling the complete set of operational external publicity activities, the two tasks can easily be separated. They are related but not intertwined. For instance, in Germany, there is an official at the level of a State Secretary (equal to the Secretary in the Government of India) who is the official spokesman. A separate Press Office handles the Indian XP kind of work headed by an Additional Secretary rank official (called a 'Ministerial direktor'). In addition, the Foreign Minister has his own spokesman. There is an identical situation of separation of the spokesman and the publicity functions in all other large foreign ministries. Both are simply too important to be clubbed together.

The Indian tradition is not to have a separate spokesman for the Prime Minister in his foreign affairs work, save in exceptional circumstances such as in the days following the nuclear tests of May 1998 when the Principal Secretary to the PM acted as the PM's official spokesman. Having a full time MEA spokesman would ensure that this official has enough time to familiarize himself with foreign affairs issues in depth. He would then perform better in the highly charged media atmosphere that surrounds each major issue where the first reaction is all that commands attention and where the ability to deliver the right sound byte is crucial.

It would probably make good sense to entrust to the spokesman also the job of 'managing' the foreign correspondents, recommends Ambassador Kishan Rana.<sup>27</sup> He would handle the work of the official interface for facilitating this demanding community. There are 100 full-time foreign correspondents in India, besides TV and sound technicians, plus part-time stringers. The bulk of them are concentrated in Delhi, and cover neighbouring countries as well. All issues, from their visas and accreditation, to technical facilities are handled through the XP Division.

Secondly, whoever is handling the media has, in most cases, no media experience. There is no requirement, so far as I am aware, that the person who has to handle the media here or abroad has to have some awareness of how the media functions. That person has never been in a newsroom. He/she does not know which turn of phrase would make headlines. This is a matter which may appear to be simplistic to an outsider, but those who have been in the profession know how difficult it is to pick up the elements of what makes news, of what gets across and what would make headlines.

Thirdly, what is extremely relevant to the situation outside the country is the ability to cultivate journalists, to get to know senior journalists, such as editors etc. on a personal basis so that you get your view across, at least they listen to you, which is at present not the case (with a very few exceptions). There is no point in sitting in your room and serving sherry or inviting people for dinner occasionally and wishfully thinking that will do. That is not so. It is a personal relationship. And it takes time and effort and a particular kind of talent which many people don't have. The few who have this talent need to be valued.

With some exceptions, the MEA regards the Press Counsellor's job as some kind of a nice and comfortable posting for somebody you like to do a favour in some foreign country. He need not know the language. He need not have any experience of the media. There is also no point in



posting somebody for three years and expect him to get to know everybody.

Media Access: As regards the question of accessibility of mediapersons to information, the problem seems to stem from some apprehension and, therefore, the belief among South Block mandarins that foreign policy is best conducted when the media knows as little as possible since media persons are by and large sensationalists. And the less you tell them the better.

Governments are inclined more often than not to keep news to themselves in the belief that news is power, and that news shared is power lost. "Disseminating information is not part of the decision-making of the Government of India today. Whether it is the MEA, Commerce Ministry, Home Ministry, whatever, one has to fight an internal battle and squeeze information out of the system. The culture has to change," recalls S. Narendra, former information adviser to the PM.<sup>28</sup>

The leadership wants to perpetuate its exploitative hold on the public in a democratic society by withholding and not sharing information either downwards or horizontally. One of the problems the country is facing in the field of national security is that even our intelligence agencies are soaked in this culture of withholding intelligence, making it available only to the top echelons. "There is today a cultural conflict between those who want to see India as a knowledge-based society in the information age and those who want to freeze the semi-industrialised and semi-feudal order for their own parochial interests," opines K. Subrahmanyam, the doyen among the country's strategic analysts<sup>29</sup>

Let alone Indian scribes, even veteran foreign journalists, reporting on this subcontinent, have been at the receiving end of this 'classified culture'. The Guardian correspondent Susan Goldenburg has found that access has been variable and mostly dependent on the spokesperson. "I

think the biggest factor, at least for foreign journalists, in making a part of your routine to go to briefings is that quite frankly the policy has been not to reveal anything at any briefings. This is particularly so in respect of the Indo-Pak dialogue which is a matter of great interest for foreign journalists. The briefings have been singular in not revealing anything about what went on in the talks whether they took place in The Maldives or in Delhi or elsewhere. So, that tends to dilute the XP's role. If the role is to disseminate information, quite often the role seems to be not to give information for any section of the MEA."<sup>30</sup>

As relations between the policy-makers, the media and the MEA are becoming more and more sensitive, more and more critical, they will have to trust one another a little more, share information a little more and if you do not, then these kinds of things are going to continue because the media is getting more assertive. Everybody is looking for stories and there are so many newspapers, there are so many television channels, they are going to be looking for news.

Certainly, transparency is imperative. No doubt it has to be pursued within the framework of the understanding that certain information, whether we like it or not, is privileged. The question is the degree to which you can reveal and take people into confidence and the manner in which you do it. Pavan Verma has a way out, "I think there is a modus operandi which is sustainable, between not saying anything or not saying anything much. Fortunately or unfortunately, there is a brief to which you are bound as a bureaucrat but certainly there are other ways in which you can take the press into confidence."<sup>31</sup>

A salient point which the bureaucracy should realise is that the sole source of information is not the government. Journalists have other sources of information. They have direct access to political circles, especially in a

society like ours where there are people interested in projecting certain angles or certain nuances of any emerging or breaking news. So, when the XP Division or the spokesmen of different ministries are briefing they should keep in mind the fact that they are not the sole repository of wisdom and information.

In the context of access to information, one wonders how many people who are writing on the subject at the moment in various media, are aware of the Indian perspective. And how many people from the Foreign Office or those dealing with information have taken the trouble to inform the media about India's perspective on key issues? There is lot of rehashing and copying from each other, feeding on each other in the media. The result is that a lot of wrong information, misinformation or distortions get multiplied in the media. "It is my experience and that of a lot of colleagues, that the core information on the Indian perspective which you are looking for on a particular subject is very hard to come by. The access for an average journalist today in Delhi or outside Delhi is very very limited. And this is something the media managers or the foreign office have to look at," suggests Tarun Basu, Executive Editor, India Abroad.<sup>32</sup>

*The Image of India:* Coming to the issue of India's image abroad, we should not be too much concerned about it. First, we have to make the image inside the country because it is this image that gets carried. "Image is but a reflection of the existing realities. The best that the government spokesman or a publicity mechanism can do is to rationalise the aberrations of the image and God knows that howsoever self-praising we may be about ourselves, our image is not a terribly pleasant one now," is the opinion of J.N. Dixit.

Second, when we talk of image we feel that the best aspect of India's image needs always to be projected. This is just not possible, particularly in a democracy, with a vibrant media like ours. For instance, when Outlook magazine prints a cover story on how corrupt we are, that is picked up by foreign correspondents stationed here. He does not have to do much investigative work. He says a responsible magazine says this.

"If you want to project India, no matter what the XP Division or the PIO's (Principal Information Officer) office does, one picture in an Indian newspaper cancels out whatever you might have achieved," avers Arvind Deo, former Additional Secretary, MEA.<sup>33</sup> Recalling a relevant experience, he adds, "When I was in Budapest, I got a long letter written by the then Minister of State as to how we should project India. By the same bag I received a copy of The Hindustan Times which carried a picture of a dog eating from a dustbin around which a child was sitting and also trying to pick something out of it. It was worse than a thousand words. Now it is no longer an insular world. It is not for the MEA or the I&B Ministry to project India beyond a point. Our own press is doing it. And these are pictures which can be transmitted by the flick of a mouse."

The MEA alone is not responsible for the country's image. Nor only will those who are covering the MEA and foreign relations will make the image. Today, interpreting or informing the press about policy is not a focus phenomenon on the political aspects of foreign relations. The content of foreign policy has changed compared to even the period after independence because, today it involves a whole range of activities traditionally considered not a part of foreign policy. There is the developmental aspect, the cultural aspect, the energy security aspect, all forming part of foreign policy. As such, it is not just the MEA, the entire government has to deal with an entire gamut of developments.

And the projection has to be at two levels: first, people with necessary expertise in these diverse fields should be positioned in the government to brief the press. Where the foreign policy aspects of these problems are involved, the focal point should be the JS, XP and there need not be any struggle for turf. "There has been a traditional struggle for turf between the PIO and the JS, XP. And it bears upon personalities. If the JS, XP is full of himself, then it becomes a difficult exercise in public relations. If he understands the totality of the picture and realises that it can be a cooperative effort, it works. But this is a fact which we have to acknowledge", reveals Dixit.<sup>34</sup>

The second point is the nature and attitude of the media. Possibly, more than 25 years ago, even senior members of the press had a certain sense of formality and they even felt that analysis was theirs, assessment was theirs, but there was no abrasive critical approach of an essentially adversarial relationship. The press knew that the government did not want to give full information, that was an elementary fact of life. But now, the press has become irreverent, it has become investigative. Leaving aside the more sober and thoughtful members of the press, there is a tendency towards scoring points, proving the fellow wrong, or get more information than was given, to prove him wrong. This has only exacerbated the adversarial relationship. And this has become a sensitive aspect of media management which the XP apparatus and the publicity apparatus of the government have to take into account. The younger generation of journalists is much more dynamic and full of questions; they are much more sceptical about life in general and issues in particular. The press today is not mentally, psychologically the press which is grateful for the nice things which the government does.

*The Projection of Foreign Policy:* As regards the projection of foreign policy, Prime Ministerial visits abroad are of much consequence. Unfortunately, Indian Prime Ministers do not merit news coverage once they leave the Indian shores, unless they go to a neighbouring country. Going back to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's trip in 1994 to the US, it was quite an eye-opener for this scholar. The PM then visited four American cities and wrapped it up with a press conference in Washington. But the entire trip did not produce a single sentence worth reporting in the American media. This was something that was debated at length at that time. Many editorials were written as to why the PM's trip went unnoticed. If you compare that to the mileage that the Chinese President received around that time, it is even more relevant.

At that time, this scholar happened to talk to the White House correspondent of the Washington Post and asked him why it was so. He

was very frank about it, "Look, there was nothing worthy of your PM. Your PM was not known in this part of the world. Nobody has made an effort to sell him and inform the American media as to who the person is. Number two: Nothing that the PM said was of any interest to the American audience. He made a very good speech in the US Congress but I was overruled by our editor because he felt the PM had said nothing that was of interest for our readers."

Dixit reduces the problem to these basics: "If you buy \$3 billion worth of Boeing planes you are news in the US. If you are placing an order for three nuclear reactors worth another \$2 billion you are news. If you are a nuclear power with Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile capacity you are news. India is not any of them. So, there are certain basic limitations. These can be overcome if you were a big market of interest to them."

Well, \$3 billion dollars may not be the answer considering the fact that months after Rao went to the US, Benazir Bhutto was on the front page of the The Washington Post. She had a photograph in the Washington Times. Everywhere she was there. So, you have to have something that attracts the attention of the press. That is precisely why the American presidents are coached by the media relations people to come up with a kind of statement, ad-libbing catch phrase that gets the attention of the print media or the television people. That is what is conspicuously missing in some of our Prime Ministers.

*Issue of External Publicity:* Lastly, there is the issue of external publicity, pertaining to neighbouring countries. In Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, there are millions of people who cannot afford television and like listening to external services of All India Radio. Our external services should not be confused with the external services of the BBC. They make an effort along thoroughly professional lines. Those at the AIR think that external services has nothing to do with the country. Sometimes the programmes are infantile and sometimes positively hostile. And any advice given professionally by the Foreign Office has been overruled on

occasions by AIR authorities or the PMO or by both. One is constrained to say that some of the external services programmes are best not broadcast.

Let us not imagine that only AIR's external services are responsible for projecting India. Indian print media plays a great role. In nearly all neighbouring countries our print media is read carefully. In Sri Lanka, every educated opinion-maker reads *The Hindu* in its entirety before 5 pm in the evening. Tamil newspapers are also read. In Nepal more copies of three or four English language Indian newspapers are sold than the entire official media production in the country. They are, in fact, available in certain areas one or two days before the local newspapers.

In Bangladesh they are not widely read. According to official sources, Indian newspapers and news magazines are 'not a commercially traded commodity'. In Pakistan they are not read because their import is banned. However, with the increasing popularity of private satellite channels and their news bulletins, Indian news goes across and for which the MEA or any segment of the Government of India is not responsible. What is required is that there has to be a concerted effort in projecting India. It is as much the print media as the electronic that has to do this and it need not be necessarily the government line that they have to take, to project India. Projecting India is different from projection of merely Government of India policies; it is in the projection of India that we have failed. Sometimes, we have over-projected Government policies, and under-projected India. The time has come for giving some serious thought to it.

### **Trend Analysis**

The foregoing discussion brings us to the core dilemma confronting diplomats and mediapersons, particularly in the Indian context: Is there a fundamental conflict between the government talking secretly with a foreign government on the one hand and informing the media about that negotiation on the other?

The government, while fending off criticism on its handling of major diplomatic events, either here or abroad, appears strongly convinced that sensitive negotiations cannot be conducted except in secret. For instance, the then Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh declared at Agra at the end of the Summit, "When it comes to bilateral or international issues, we do not and cannot negotiate through the media."

Singh's stand sent out two messages: firstly, that the right to information does not include a right to know what happens in international and bilateral negotiations. Secondly, that such transparency is not in our national interest. This raises serious questions about the functioning of an elected government when policy has to be initiated and given shape. Singh may have also meant that the media could not act as an intermediary.

Policies are no doubt made by the state but that does not invalidate the role of civil society and its stakes in pursuing peace. While an element of confidentiality is essential in the build-up and conduct of a summit, to deny to the public, information which is vital for a sense of security, amounts to repudiating the involvement of large sections of people in the process towards reconciliation.

"An element of secrecy may be alright-or inevitable-in a summit. But the nation's right to know should not be denied by the government, whose duty it is to keep the nation informed. For a country that takes pride in its democratic maturity, this institutionalised discomfort with sharing of information is a glaring incongruity. Information-or the manipulation of it-may be an effective instrument of subjugation for paranoid dictatorships, not for a country like India. Information sharing is the obligation of any democracy that has nothing to hide", commented India Today in an editorial.<sup>35</sup>

The problem is that while the government is reiterating the classical principles of diplomacy, the world has changed a lot. Media is far more intrusive than ever before and has indeed complicated the business of diplomacy and negotiations between nations. It scrutinises every tentative



idea, each trial balloon, every proposal aimed at teasing the other side and forces public responses from different political formations from within the country and from across the borders.

Today, media power is a reality that cannot be wished away. Political leaders have by and large come to terms with the new media realities in the rough and tumble of domestic politics. It is high time our diplomatic establishment too recognised the new media imperative. Working with the Internet and the electronic media could generate 'force multipliers' for Indian diplomacy. Working against them would only produce negative outcomes. "Getting the foreign policy set-up to imbibe the virtues of public diplomacy must be a key element of the long overdue security sector reforms in India," emphasises C. Raja Mohan, Strategic Editor of *The Hindu*.<sup>36</sup>

Here, a caveat needs to be entered on the side of the media. In the situation of media excess, the media's role in diplomacy has become proactive. In attempting to second guess the agenda for the talks, it has ended up wanting to set it. There were shades of this during the Lahore initiative three years ago. The idea of the Lahore bus trip in 1999 was mooted in an interview conducted with the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, by the editor of *The Indian Express*.

Similar shades of experience were visible during the run up to the Agra Summit. 'We the People' on Star TV, conducted from Islamabad, aired the idea of Pakistan giving up its demand for a plebiscite and got Pakistanis to respond. Zee TV attempted to queer the pitch by taking a hardline stance just the weekend before. Its 'Inside Story' raked up Kargil, the Pakistani treachery during it, and so on.

The media's agenda setting creates a more informed public opinion, one that knows what the issues are and what the options are. The negative aspect is that so many wish-lists crowd the agenda, confuse priorities and raise expectations. If the media resists the temptation to do this it will be a thoughtful contribution to the peace process.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Policy decisions ought to be taken with an eye first and foremost towards what is sound and in the national interest, not towards what is temporarily popular in the opinion polls or towards what will gain a quick, favourable notice on television. A government cannot take sound decisions about, for example, the use of military force based on a referendum or some theory of participatory democracy. The public simply does not know enough about the world to be able to render sound judgements on issues such as the National Missile Defence (NMD) or nuclear command and control. Were foreign policy to be dictated solely by public opinion, several sound decisions would never have been taken. For instance, the United States would have long ago cancelled its foreign aid programme and it would not have instituted a peacetime draft before the Second World War.

By the same token, it is a serious mistake for the executive branch officials to make policy hastily in order to meet news broadcast deadlines. Policy-makers should respect the power of television and learn how to utilize it in conducting policy. They should not be cowed by it. In retrospect, several key members of the Carter administration thought they were wrong to respond within hours to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a decision based in part on a perceived need to make the evening news.

Once the leadership of the country has adopted a policy, there is also a clear need for the administration to conduct an open dialogue with the press on its purpose and thinking. Obviously, in order to carry out a policy, the administration needs to build and maintain public support. For instance, the Reagan administration demonstrated a remarkable effectiveness in convincing the European public to accept the deployment of missiles on their soil. During the Kargil War, the Vajpayee government was able to convince international opinion that Pakistan was the transgressor and the sanctity of the LoC should be maintained.

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Ajai K. Rai is Research Fellow at IDSA working on 'National Security and the Indian Media'. He has been associated with the media in different capacities for about 13 years and has worked with The Times of India (Mumbai), India Post, Sunday Observer and the Eenadu Group. He has been on the visiting faculty of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi for the last three years. He was also a Press Fellow at Cambridge University in 1994.