Chapter V
The Print Media and Reporting of Violence

Introduction

The history of modern media begins with the printed book. And it was almost two hundred years after the invention of printing, there appeared a prototypical newspaper, which could be distinguished, from the handbills, pamphlets and newsletters of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The origin of newspapers goes back to the idea of newsletters that circulated via a rudimentary postal service, an activity that becomes part of the public domain circulating information relevant to international trade and commerce. Gradually it started circulating Government fiat, diplomatic and commercial communications and also private events. The early newspaper was marked by its regular appearance, commercial basis for sale and public character. Thus, it was used for information, record, advertising, diversion and gossip. The seventeenth century commercial newspaper was not identified with any single source but it was a compilation made by a printer and publisher. The official variety as published by Government was a voice of authority and an instrument of state. However, other forms of media existed long before the press developed as a mass medium. But, social and economic change in the late nineteenth century, together with various technological developments, led to the emergence of the modern newspapers, directed to, and for a mass readership.

The Press Barons were particularly responsible for substantial changes in the economic organization of the press from the late nineteenth into the early decades of the twentieth century. Of importance in our context is the fact that these mass-circulating newspapers acted during wartime as vehicles for propaganda and means of sustaining national morale. For the media, World War II was a chance to exhibit that country always came first. Ten days after the Pearl Harbour attack, the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45) exclaimed, “All American abhor censorship, just as they abhor war. But the experience of this and of all other nations has demonstrated that some degree of censorship is essential in war time and we are at war” (Copeland 198). Even the media agreed for that. In almost every situation, the nation’s media voluntarily censored its information, always keeping the nation’s welfare central to its reporting.
Roosevelt repeatedly emphasized the importance of media and “the constant free flow of information” to ensure an informed populace. Before the war ended, the nation’s press outlets had sent more than seventeen hundred reporters, photographers, videographers and sound technician to supply the nation with information. The President’s rhetoric of a free press with the necessity of self-control by the media became the basis of information dispersal during World War II (Copeland 198). The commercial newspaper was the form, which had given most shape to the newspaper institution, and its development can be seen in retrospect as a major turning point in communication history by offering first of all a service to its anonymous readers and then being used as an instrument of propaganda by authorities. Hence, the newspaper was more of an innovation than the printed book and an invention of a new literary, social and cultural form even if it might not have been so perceived at the beginning. Compared with other forms of cultural communication, the distinctiveness of newspapers lied in its orientation towards presenting reality, utility, disposability, while trying to remain secular for the emerging class who were mostly town based business and professional people. Its novelty consisted not in its technology or manner of distribution, but in its functions for a distinct class in a changing and more liberal social political climate.

Evolution of the Newspaper

Even from its early days, the newspaper was an actual or potential adversary of established power, especially in its own self-perception. Potent images in press history refer to violence done to printers, editors and journalists. Often within a broader movement for freedom, democracy and citizen rights, the struggle for freedom to publish is mostly emphasized in journalism’s own myth. Interestingly, early newspapers did not seek to offend authorities instead in most cases were produced on their behalf (McQuail 29). However, despite major setbacks from time to time, there has been a steady progression towards more press freedom. This progress has sometimes taken the form of greater sophistication in the means of control applied to the press. Legal restraint replaced violence, and the institutionalization of the press within a market system serves as a form of control, and the modern newspaper, as a large business enterprise, is vulnerable to more pressure or intervention than its simpler forerunners were. The newspaper did not really become a true “mass” medium until the twentieth century, in the sense of directly reaching a majority of the population on a regular basis, and there are still quite large inter-country differences in the extent of newspaper
reading. There has been a gradual worldwide decline in newspaper reading over the last decade, despite the increase in literacy with the rise of the Internet (McQuail 29). As such, the fact cannot be denied that newspapers are widely held to be in serious crisis. In the Western world, the rise of online news and multiple sources of news and information have changed the economics of newspaper publishing. The impact of the Global Financial Crisis and the associated downturn in newspaper advertising spending has only exacerbated the economic difficulties confronting the industry. The crisis has been felt most painfully in the United States, where even as online audiences grow, print circulation continues to decline. Even more critically, so does advertising revenue.

However, the crisis of the newspaper is far from universal. In China and India, newspaper markets are growing strongly, fuelled by robust economic growth and demand from an emerging urban and literate middle class that is enjoying higher incomes and rising standards of living. In India, the growth of a popular vernacular press is skewed to entertainment, scandal, gossip and sports with some coverage of public affairs; which while not being a perfect development, supplements what the Indian media system has offered to the country’s citizens in the past. Data from the PricewaterhouseCoopers’ Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2011-15 reveals a considerable decline in the newspaper markets of the United States and United Kingdom and fast growth in the newspaper markets in China and India. While the West is in decline, the East rises. According to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers World Press Trends in 2010 edition, China accounts for 25 of the world’s top 100 paid-for daily newspapers and India for 22 (World Press Trends 7). Even, The Economist in 2011 in a “Special Report: The News Industry”, says that there is certainly no sign of a news crisis in India, which is the world’s fastest growing newspaper market. In 2008, India overtook China to become the leader in paid for daily circulation with 110 million copies sold each day. According to the Indian Media and Entertainment Industry Report 2011 by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, a trade body, and KPMG, a consultancy institution, India is one of the largest newspaper markets with more than 107 million copies circulated daily, more than China, and accounting for more than 20 per cent of all dailies across the world. “The total literate population in India is estimated to be 579 million with over 30 per cent readership penetration. The Indian print market is well off in comparison to the global market, which is witnessing a decline in print revenues over the past few years. Developed regions such as North America and the U.K. are witnessing a
significant decline in newspaper circulation while India defies the trend. In contrast to
the U.S., U.K. and global trends, print circulation numbers in India continue to be on an
uptrend. Furthermore, given rising literacy levels and no immediate threat of new media
platforms, the trend is expected to sustain over the next five years” (FICCI-KPMG 37).

In this context, Robert Picard (2012) says that people with disposable income
buy newspapers, start thinking about social issues and seek out more entertainment.
“They start looking for products that would be of interest and the newspapers are filling
that role right now and so there’s great growth going on in them [China and India]”
(Hooke 51). Picard further maintains that the economic, social and demographic
changes are coming together in a way that makes newspapers very attractive. In this
regard Hooke comments: “They also have such large populations that it’s easy to get
half a million or a million people to read a publication and when you’re doing that
you’re starting to get real economic viability” (Hooke 51).

The newspaper in India has been essentially an urban middle class phenomenon.
But, in a democracy where the middle class emerged because of sustained economic
and literary growth, it becomes important as a social convention on a citizen’s part to
stay informed about public affairs. Therefore, to buy a newspaper becomes a more
attractive proposition for the individual citizen. Even for the advertisers it becomes an
attractive platform to invest more money considering the size of the reading public. The
2011 national census data showed an adult literacy level of 74 per cent, up nine per cent
from the last census a decade ago. “As soon as a person becomes literate, what they get
is a newspaper – even before they buy a phone, it’s the first luxury a man affords,” said
A.S. Raghunath, in a report by The Globe and Mail.

Mr. Raghunath, a veteran editor who advises new entrants in regional markets
remarked that the newspaper retains an aura of respect in India and the newly literate
like to be seen with one. The Globe and Mail in this context reports: “with a cover
price of one, two or at most four rupees, new-reading households will often subscribe to
not just one paper, but two or three” (Hooke 57). Along with growth in literacy, the
number of newspaper readers in local languages also grew. The Hindi newspapers got a
huge boost in circulation since 1990’s. In 1982, the Second Press Commission
complained, in its majority report, about the urban bias of the newspaper industry. But it
incorporated a dissenting note in which three members of the Commission wrote, “The
fact of the matter is that papers are not being read in the villages because of illiteracy,
lack of purchasing power and lack of communications. Whenever this situation
changed, they added, newspapers would blossom in the rural hinterland without any prodding from the Government of the day. In other words, the market would be there to tap the rural readership” (224). In many countries, the most important newspaper sector has been the local and regional press. The common features include news values relevant to local readership; a typically consensual and bipartisan approach and a dependence on support from local advertisers. Considering the global scenario, one common early form of the newspaper was the party-political paper dedicated to the task of activism, information and organization. Gradually, the party newspaper has lost ground to commercial press. In the nineteenth century, social and economic change created circumstances conducive to the growth of newspaper for wider circulation. Increasing industrialization, urbanization, technological innovation and changes in transportation and education had a great impact. The growth of widely circulating newspapers in the context of more literate and urbanized populations raised questions about the power of the press in relation to public opinion. The role of war correspondents became very important where the development of mass circulating media was critical to any broader impact of reporting from the battlefronts. The large-scale control and presentation of information became vital during World War II, when civilians, as well as the military, were critical of the war. The manipulation of information was directed first to maintain morale among the home front population and second to influence opinion in neutral and enemy countries. And, the issues of censorship and propaganda were central in these aspects.

**Media, Modernity and Propaganda**

The project of modernity that is excessively amplified by media is very violent. It has a paradoxical thesis. The quintessential aspects of modernity include a respect for individual freedom, the belief in human beings’ ability to decide their destiny, and the adoption of science and technology, which was accepted without any opposition. For instance, the local press has adopted the latest technology as a key instrument of growth and expansion. They now provide an alternative platform of participation to those who have been overlooked by English-language newspapers. Robertson has critiqued the idea of modernity that supports ‘a general homogenization of institutions and basic experiences in a temporal, historical mode’ (Robertson 27). Appadurai and Breckenridge similarly contended that ‘most societies today possess the means for the
local production of modernity’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1). Likewise, Therborn (Therborn 124-39) identified the autonomous development of modernity in areas outside Europe. What is distinct about the experience of vernacular modernity produced as a result of the rise of Hindi newspapers is their ability to draw from local cultural resources while adopting state-of-the-art technology, often imported from the West.

John Thompson in his work The Media and Modernity (2013) highlights the use of the word “mass” and claims that most of the media today are not produced for people but for niche markets. He adds, “The term ‘mass’ is especially misleading. It conjures up the image of a vast audience comprising many thousands, even millions of individuals. This may be an accurate image in the case of some media products, such as the most popular modern-day newspapers, films and television programmes; but it is hardly an accurate representation of the circumstance of most media products, past or present” (Thompson 24). In this context, we need to understand what wars and violence exactly mean to the newspapers and other organs of the media. At one level, the media must know the facts, understand the truth and disseminate information to the readers or listeners or viewers. At another level war helps boost circulation. “Indeed, the combination that seems best to increase circulation involves local people in great events. Wars are excellent. Readers are fired with the thrill of the contest, and they also have friends and loved ones in the army: people at home want to know what is happening. War often provides the impetus to carry newspapers beyond the circles to which they were previously confined” (Jeffrey 77). Studies all over reveal that newspapers have gained in circulation whenever there had been violent conflicts, wars and terrorism. Robin Jeffrey quotes a number of studies regarding this and he gave the instance of the famous steam driven cylinder presses in Britain which was introduced in November 1814, partly in response to the demand for news generated by wars with Napolean.

The Crimean war in the 1950s and the South African War of 1898 at the turn of the century provided incentive to deploy improved printing methods to reach new readers, who for economic and educational reasons were available and worth cultivating. In the United States, the civil war of 1860s and Spanish American war of 1898 were good wars for newspapers. In France, in the 1860s, the newspaper was still, like the white bread brought home from fairs, a rare urban delicacy, and a preserve of the privileged few. Partly as a result of the interest generated by the Franco-Russian War of 1870-71, circulation of some papers tripled and the small papers read locally
began to flourish from the 1870s. In Russia wars and revolution boosted the circulation of the old and new newspapers. In India, wars with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 and the Kargil War again with Pakistan in 1999 boosted the circulation of the newspapers all across the country. Viewership of TV channels during the Kargil War jumped almost twice as did the number of listeners of news over radio, both AIR and BBC. Kargil war was the first televised war for the Indian viewers and people glued to their TV screens as if they were watching a sports spectacle. In Pakistan, a similar increase in circulation and viewership was recorded. People’s desire to know, and understand becomes insatiable during armed conflicts.

In twentieth century, the exploitation of media for political purposes became common place. Totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany provided striking examples for propaganda that was by no means absent from democratic societies. A major difference in official approaches to use of propaganda was willingness as opposed to reluctance to “label” activities aimed at persuading or influencing the minds and political behaviour of others. In their rise to power the Nazis attempted to make use of established media. The party acquired a Bavarian newspaper in the early 1920s but did not succeed in establishing a wide circulation and failed to attract many journalists or writers. Nazi Germany was a propaganda state, and Joseph Goebbels (1933) was a key figure in making it to happen. Goebells “felt that Propaganda should continue to play an important role even after the Nazis had come to power. Propaganda would be necessary to mobilize the masses in support of the new state and its ideological foundations” (Taylor 157). Thus, propaganda was a vital means of converting citizens to Nazi ideology, and, as in the Soviet Union, when propaganda failed to achieve its objective, terror was used as an additional instrument of the state. Aiming to politicise all aspects of society the Soviet and Nazi regime could afford to bring propaganda as a central role in political and social life. Whereas in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia the content of propaganda was directly controlled by the regime, in liberal democratic countries the propagandist’s task was more complicated. Democratic Governments did not usually enjoy the benefits of direct control of the media but relied instead on censorship and regulation. In such societies, not all propaganda are Government propaganda, people who controlled and worked in media organisation often had their own ideas as to what messages were best calculated to encourage public support for the war. In liberal democratic societies, the need for systematic propaganda comparable to that of the totalitarian regimes was recognised by the democracies only
in wartime. During World War I, countries on both sides of the war employed propaganda to mobilise the domestic mass support essential for war and to even influence opinion in neutral and enemy countries. For the same purposes, at the start of the World War II, allied Governments established propaganda agencies like Office War Information and Ministry of Information in Britain. The use of euphemism “information” in these cases reflected the negative view of propaganda prevailing in the liberal democratic societies, where it was regarded as something that could be justified only in extreme circumstances and only as a necessary evil.

The dissemination of information by Governments through the media used to be a cornerstone of nation building and political control, but unfettered access to media communications is increasingly facilitating challenges to established regimes by activists and militant groups. All forms of violence whether terrorism or political are acts of communication not just means to an end but part of a wider process of communicating a message and generating a desired response. The media is the principal catalyst by which those communications are disseminated. Media also play the political role that work as agents of stability, of restraint (through monitoring and challenging Governments) and are also agents of change (McCargo 3–4). For those engaged in political violence the objective is to use violence to acquire heightened attention from the public, political elites and policy-making circles, as a trigger to promote debate on their objectives. Violence serves as a universal key to focus media attention and gain publicity (Nacos 99), thereby enabling non-state actors to set the media agenda. It is through setting the media agenda and influencing political debates that combatants transform their violence into political power (Schaeffert 63).

In the late 1970’s, India witnessed a revolution in Indian-language newspapers. But it went unnoticed by India’s English speaking elite and was virtually unknown to outside world. Harold Innis (1951), a Canadian scholar, has made a strong observation pertaining to the changing role of print. According to him, the communication industry was largely responsible for facilitating the consolidation of the emergence of nationalism, vernaculars and new eruption of savagery in the twentieth century. He traced the origin of the print media to the savage religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As per his beliefs, the evolution of communications technology had played the most important role in shaping the history of human beings. However, Innis also had the opinion that the book, the newspaper and the printing press variously
shaped and spread the idea of nationalism but the role played by them was not enough. The printing press primarily popularized the idea of national identity and citizenship. Innis thought that the connection between Governments and capitalism had to undergo a significant change and only then the conditions would become suitable for the printing press to work in the most effective manner. Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Benedict Anderson (1983), the intellectual successors of Harold Innis, adapted and furthered his ideas on nationalism, national identity and citizenship vis-a-vis media. Newspapers have the potential to promote ethnic nationalism and secessionism. It is possible to imagine that powerful proprietors of Indian language newspapers contribute to political movements calling for sub-national identities based on a region’s language and culture. This is what happened in Europe in the nineteenth century, where printers and newspapers were vital in propagating nationalisms. In the 1990s, in India many vernacular newspapers fuelled the passion for autonomy movements in different parts including North East India. Like other cases in history, India also faced imposition of “thought control” through the National Emergency declared in 1975. It was done not merely by controlling the Indian mass media but also by moulding the media to the purpose of the Government in power. During the emergency period, most of India’s vernacular dailies, almost gave up the battle for press freedom. Their pages were “filled with fawning accounts of national events, flattering pictures of Indira Gandhi and her ambitious son, and not coincidentally, lucrative Government advertising” (Singh 40). But two tough, prominent publishers of English language dailies-- The Indian Express and The Statesman-- fought courageously against Indira Gandhi’s efforts to muzzle the press.

Subjectivity, ideology, predilections and profit motive are factors that mostly colour news and its dissemination. However, it does not mean what we read in a newspaper is all coloured and not honest reporting. There are news reporting that stands for truth and honesty of purpose. In this context, Bertrand Russell, in his book Sceptical Essays (1928) on the issue of propaganda and freedom of the press writes, “there is an increasing tendency for control of resources of opinion and to be concentrated in a few hands, with the result that minority (dissenting) opinion loses chance of effective expression” (Russell 188). And it is only “the scientific temper capable of regenerating mankind and providing an issue for all our troubles. The result of science in the form of mechanism, poison gas, and the yellow press, bid fair to lead to the total downfall of our
civilization” (Russell 143). Russell goes deeper into the issue of propaganda when he observes “our system of education turns out young people out of the schools able to read, but for the most part unable to weigh evidence or to form an independent opinion. They are then assailed through the rest of their lives by statements designed to make them believe all sorts of absurd propositions” (Russell 136). The education system helps the media barons in producing uncritical minds that are accessible easily in the market place. At such times media becomes a handmaiden for propaganda for those who wish to manipulate minds of the people. As a powerful organization, media often determine, manipulate and intervene in political processes as some media owners do have interests in other businesses. This view held by many, is now gaining greater acceptance as some media firms have close business links with corporate houses manufacturing or doing business in arms. The Governments also need media to win public support for its policies, for example in case of American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, media conglomerates need the Government to expand their business and make more money. Information control is the most important function in modern societies; whoever has control over information has the power. Both media and Governments recognize each other’s powers and weaknesses. It is a game that is played out with a common objective of sharing power and controlling information flow or its obstruction. In this context, large scale violence and wars help the media houses to exercise more power. TV ratings go up, as do sale of newspapers. This directly brings more advertisements and more revenue for the media. Modern democracies need public opinion on their side all the time, but they require much more when waging a war or are engaged in a violent conflict. Even despots require public opinion on their side. This is an imperative in view of the flow of information not respecting state boundaries or other artificial barriers. The Governments adopt different methods and they vary with the prevailing political system and the structure of the media. Democratic regimes with their regular elections and some kind of participatory management adopt more sophisticated ways to subvert honest public opinion.

**Public Opinion and the Press**

In disseminating news worldwide, mass media use narrative techniques to create unique themes of interest. The frames used by mass media are vital in organizing concepts that are also in line with hegemonic political interests and utilize dichotomous
logic in the construction of an “us” versus “them” narratives. To elucidate this point Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1922), describes an island where a handful of French, English and Germans lived peaceably just before World War I. A British mail steamer provided their only link with the outside world. One day in mid-September, the ship brought news that the English and French had been fighting the Germans for over six weeks. For those six weeks the islanders, technically enemies to each other, had acted as friends, trusting "the pictures in their heads." Lippmann's compelling allegory has intrigued communication scholars ever since. His simple but important point is that we must distinguish between "reality" and "social reality"—that is, as Lippmann termed it, "the world outside" of actual events and our mediated knowledge of those events—because we think and behave based not on what is true but what we perceive it to be. In ancient times, the world that people knew was about everything close at hand. They rarely ventured far from their own communities. They lived and died close to where they were born. The complexity and interdependency of modern society, however, mean that economic and political forces affect people. In fact, we could argue that most of the world that matters to us is beyond our direct grasp and must necessarily be mediated, thus becoming, as Lippmann called it, a "pseudo-environment." The importance of the mass media as sources for these pictures in our heads leads us logically to the question how closely the media world actually resembles the world outside. The extent to which we see the mass media as distorting the world outside depends on how we envision actions of media. Some conceptions treat media as passive transmitters of events; others view the media as taking a far more active role in manipulating or "constructing" reality.

During the first half of 19th century, newspapers provided the main tool with which to influence and alter public opinion. The newspapers informed readers of events and in the editorials and coverage alike helped to shape public opinion. In this age, historian Daniel Boorstin says, "If you wanted to know what the public thought, you could simply pick up a newspaper. Changes were recorded daily, or twice daily, opinions were vivified by journalists ... they were forced into being by earnest newspapermen trying to make news, they were played against one another" (Boorstin 233-234). Newspapers not only report the news and retell events, but they influence the way the public creates images of what happens in the world around them.
In the same book *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippman describes the importance and power of the images that the media places into the minds of the people: "The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, their purposes, and relationships, are their public opinions" (Lippman 30). Newspapers created the print versions of events that happened outside of a citizen's immediate sphere of perception. Without media like newspapers, American people are confined to their own private spheres – simply clinging to their own homes and communities. Especially during times of war, when events take place away from the individual public sphere, newspapers become the creator of images, defining events the public cannot see. News reporters ventured behind the lines in dangerous wartime situations to see the events and record what they see. In World War II alone 1,646 news correspondents were recognized by the United States War and Navy Departments (Stein 94). The newspapers provided the public with up-to-date information on what was happening daily on the battlefront. Newspapers played active roles along with radio in both World War I and World War II to report the operations on the battlefields by bringing stories before the readers and thereby readers formed their perceptions of the war from the written word. Their words helped to recreate the events that happened in the outside world and this information contributed to creating images of war. Boorstin (1977) argues how the selection of stories and coverage attitudes of newspapers in turn alters the image of events like wars in the minds of the public. They offer "a shrewdly selected range of stories viz items of pseudo-events which was well-suited to the interests of the particular newspaper or magazine" in the process of "image build-up" (Boorstin 90). Through selective coverage and emphasis on certain events, newspapers create an image in the public mind of events happening around the nation and around the world. In World War I and World War II, Americans constantly consulted their newspapers and radios to follow the events of the battlefront. Reporting news for the press evolved over time which created a reading public mostly during times of war. World War II saw newspapers and radio reign supreme in war coverage, and not coincidentally, it was also one of the most popular wars in American history. Even when the homefront was battle weary, there was a general consensus in the country that people were fighting for a common goal -- to aid American allies in Europe and defend their interests in the Pacific arena.
Especially in recent times, images of death and destruction have negatively influenced public sentiment. While in World War II, a war mainly covered by heavily censored print journalism, there was a general positive consensus on the war, but the Vietnam conflict marked a dramatic change. Each night American audience watched the war from their living rooms, seeing graphic imagery of death and mutilation. Images were not totally responsible for turning the tide against the war, but they were much more divisive than the print medium of World War II. In the United States during the 1940's and 1950's, newspapers probably had a more "violent" tone than radio news coverage of the same events. Among wire services, a copy intended for newspapers was more sensationalized than the same intended for radio stations. There can be little doubt that topics of violence are of intense interest to the public and attract large audiences. This interest seems to extend across all media.

The need to reconsider how we theorize and research media representations of violence has become increasingly pressing in the post-September 11, 2001. Scholars began focusing on the mass atrocities inflicted on civilian populations as a separate subject of research after the trauma of World War I and II. The mass killings, rapes and other atrocities, as well as the presence of millions of refugees and survivors across Europe following World War II, drove scholars to conduct new studies on the origins, causes and methods of widespread violence and human suffering. In their broadest terms, these studies sought to explain the overwhelming violence of the recent past, while also uncovering disappeared peoples and neglected histories of violence and investigating the complexity of patterns of extermination across numerous cases.

Media content may be based on what happens in the physical world, but it singles out and highlights certain elements over others; and media's own structural logic is imposed on those elements. Reality is necessarily manipulated when events and people are relocated into news or prime time stories. The media can impose their own logic on assembled materials in a number of ways, including emphasizing certain behaviours and stereotyping people. Television can distort people visually through camera and other techniques. Rhetorically, people can be portrayed with different labels (e.g., freedom fighter or terrorist). One of the most obvious ways in which media content structures a symbolic environment is simply by giving greater attention (in the form of more time, greater prominence, and so on) to certain events, people, groups, and places than others.
Violent incidents that contained a human-interest story are highlighted or amplified because they suggest wider social threats such as the danger posed by strangers to unaccompanied women, or described the helpless child victim. Such news items continue to make particularly sensational and emotionally charged stories. Crimes and violence are defined as social problems and are indicative of a wider social malaise. History has therefore an important role to play in establishing how violence is portrayed, represented and interpreted both now and 150 years ago. The press, since the mid-1850s, has been the most important medium for creating the public’s awareness and perception of violent crime. Murders, assaults and other crimes against the person have literally made headline news, and as such these news stories and their associated headlines have provided historians with a rich seam of evidence.

**The Ethical Turn**

Among the cardinal principles of media ethics, fairness, impartiality, along with humanity constitute the central piece of ethical reporting. After and during the Vietnam War many journalists raised their voices against America’s unethical war against freedom. Since then the independent press if not always free from biased reporting has shown guts to provide impartial reporting through investigative journalism. The ethical turn in journalism has exposed double standards of some Governments as well as also many scandals against very powerful people for example the Watergate scandal in the United States.

However, writing a trauma story can be as challenging as interviewing the victims because these stories are always different. Journalists acknowledge that their fingers hesitate over the keyboard on trauma stories, and they sweat out finding exact words and putting up pictures that might do justice to the person and the topic. One helpful starting point is remembering that a victim’s story really is a story. That is, it is not simply a news “story,” but a true account about a particular, real human being and the traumatic events in that life. Like any well-told story, it has a beginning (lead), middle, and an end. Unlike novels and fairytales, it probably does not have a happily-ever-after ending; it may have a “kicker” in more than the usual journalistic sense of a news story climax with a twist or jolt. After all, it is a real person’s story, with all the potential for toil and trouble, trauma and tragedy, and drama and inspiration that a real life can bring.
When the Nellie violence took place in Feb 1983, one of the eyewitnesses to the violence from the journalist’s fraternity was Hemendra Narayan from *The Indian Express* along with Bedabrata Lahkar from *The Assam Tribune*. When Hemendra wrote the story that particular evening to file in the *Indian Express*, he said: “It was absolutely horrible. Though impossible to describe, I will try” (Feb 18, 1983). The Headline of the story was “Horrible Doesn’t Describe It: How Many Deaths? Difficult to Say.” So writing a story of violence and killing is very challenging for a journalist.

Media is not a monolithic organization. How we characterize one newspaper, may not necessarily be true about the other. Each newspaper, radio or television network has its own culture and tradition. Ownership patterns, structures and the kind of commitment to journalism, all count to characterize and differentiate one newspaper from another. At one level media is considered a pillar of democracy. In theory, it stands for equality and social justice and is concerned with knowing social, political and economic reality and communicating the same to the public. In a democracy its role is to provide unbiased, trustworthy information to the citizens so that they can form informed opinions and participate in the democratic process. No participatory democracy, where elections are not just periodic rituals, is possible without a vibrant media. It would be unreasonable to say that media builds only negative stereotypes. Media could be a major source to build public opinion for reason, justice and peace.

A pertinent question in this regard is: Does media determine norms and values while transmitting information by overt or covert means? What happens in case of violent conflicts? The news media since it has the ability to create reality is expected to perform a vital task to build public consensus. It is also expected to be part of the patriotic effort. People’s minds need to be won at all costs. Hence, the role of media in an armed conflict takes precedence in any Government’s policy framework. Modern day violent conflicts are increasingly turning to be information warfare. Major countries spend billions of rupees on what passes on as psychological warfare. It is the time for slogans and fervor. Rhetoric of national and cultural identity takes over all other discourse and the media is expected to be a component of that. Selection of the subjects for news and views, part of media’s working system, are all determined by discriminating news.

While reporting any violent incident, the reporter and photographer at the scene have unusual power to shape what we remember about violent stories, and what they
depict may remain in our minds forever. The stories that we don’t remember for very long; still help shape our perception regarding crime, violence, public preparedness, and builds our capacity to deal with these things. Thoughtful reporting can prepare readers and viewers to respond intelligently to subsequent events. A journalist at the scene must avoid the traps such events set for the unwary. Reporters and photographers rarely are “ready” for what they face. Journalists may hear themselves voicing the effects—venting—along with other people there. No two scenes are alike. Unfamiliar places challenge the most ingenious journalists. “Parachute” reporters—those sent from distant cities to the site of a crash or natural disaster—and local reporters often have different objectives. But to some extent it won’t matter whether the journalist comes from two blocks or two thousand miles away; the disaster or accident requires quick and sensitive action. Some sections of the media are not always working for mass audiences or for money. They have other social objectives too. Public sphere journalism still plays an important role in many countries, though commercial considerations are becoming too excruciating to sustain it.

One common point is that media in its various forms is not only an instant record of events but it is the main communicator in technology driven societies. “The narrative of the media culture offers patterns of behavior, moral messages, sugar coating of the social or violent events besides political and ideological colours. These are seductive forms of popular entertainment culture. Media and consumer culture sometimes subvert the old cultures and create celluloid images. It helps activities such as sports culture, film culture and cyber culture and integrates people into the established societies. It offers meanings, pleasures and creates identities” (Thukral 28). In fact, the purpose of journalism is to provide meaning to events as they unfold everyday. This would be possible if journalists have a clear understanding of the events and are able to place them in a proper context. It becomes all the more imperative while reporting any violent conflict. This would in turn require a degree of concern. It was not said for nothing that every headline tells a story, but stories rarely tell the whole truth. So readers of newspapers, who spend the better part of their mornings or evenings, are often misled. If some meaning has to be added to journalism, striving for truth, howsoever hard it may be, is the sine qua non.

Media reporting of the daily events is all-important. But its importance can never be understated when it is reporting conflict, violence, wars and terrorism whether by the State or groups or individuals. There is a growing body of evidence to vouch for
this importance of the power of the media with regard to conflicts; particularly armed conflicts where media persons are significant actors. The Governments and political leaders besides the armed forces clearly understand this. They make an all out effort to win the propaganda battle first and war later. So, it is important to watch the media as it watches the world around and reports. Thus it is crucial that this “first draft of history” honestly presents the record of events and their causes, and adds to our understanding. It is bound to leave a significant imprint on human destiny and history.

While reporting any violent conflict terrorism, ethnic violence or war, the media is bound to suffer many infirmities. Truth, they say, is the first casualty in any violent situation particularly when terrorists strike or when a war breaks out. But tragically, as some thinkers point out, the first causality of war is not truth, which generally dies before the hostilities begin; it is the language and the media that suffer the damage. In any armed conflict situation, the two sides involved rarely speak truth. Facts are often twisted to suit their needs. It is deception, subterfuge and lies that become plentiful in any political discourse. Media too is sharply divided across continents in their description of the people seeking political solutions through the gun. One country’s terrorists are other country’s freedom fighters and patriots and vice versa. Even before Independence, many newspapers in India were sharply polarized on communal and party lines. There were pro- Hindu or anti- Hindu newspapers as there were pro- Congress and anti-Congress press, and likewise, there were pro- Muslim League and anti- Muslim League newspapers. Thus, violence has developed a kind of symbiotic relationship with media. Repeated use of such terms by the media lend credence to the expressions and concepts drawn from the religious texts across the continents. This provides justification for mayhem and misery. The very description of the parties involved in the conflict and how the media persons label them reveals the philosophy and the ideology behind the coverage. Reporting, analyses and articles reflect ideological assumptions in most of the mainstream media. Structure and ownership patterns further colour the quality and content of reporting and comments.

South Asian Forum for Human Rights organized a seminar in November 2002 at Kathmandu on media and conflict where thirty Indian and Pakistani journalists participated. It was a rare free debate in an atmosphere of understanding. A report prepared at the end of this important seminar maintained, “The media has the power to shape agendas by means of placement, tone, and repetition and above all by the frames of analysis and facts, which it chooses and excludes. In the construction of ‘what is
news’ in the mainline mass media print, radio and television/film space has shrunk for
democratic struggles, human rights concerns and the life and death issues of the
majority of the population. In the case of media’s representation of conflicts, there is a
hierarchy. Those framed within a national security paradigm are privileged over
struggles flowing from a notion of peoples’ security. Conflicts revolving around social
justice are downplayed or depoliticized as law and order or ‘ethnic’ (essentialist)
conflicts. There is politics in media coverage of social and political conflicts or the lack
of coverage of certain conflicts, particularly those arising from denial of social justice
(eg. Caste conflicts in Bihar, Peoples War Group in Andhra Pradesh, or labour
conflicts)” (Thukral 33).

There is always an attempt to confuse the origin of violence and decontextualize
it. Struggle by peasants and other deprived sections of society for social and economic
justice are treated by the dominant sections as some kind of “pure violence”, a law and
order problem to be tackled by the police. Violence is rarely explained in context in the
daily reports, editorials or analyses. Reporting, in fact, at times blames those who after
exhausting all avenues to get any justice closed, have resorted to extreme measures. For
example, in October 2003, some cadres of Peoples War Group, an ultra-Left
organization of the Naxalites, which had been active in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and in
other adjoining states, ambushed the convoy of the Andhra Pradesh chief minister
Chandra Babu Naidu near the temple town of Tirupati. Later, the police feeling defeated
arrested and tortured six civil liberty activists. Two of them were killed in some kind of
encounter. Coverage in many newspapers and on television channels focused mainly on
the desperate violent act, but rarely went into the causes of this violence. To be fair,
some newspapers and commentators on TV, however, did focus on land reforms and the
issues concerning development. In this regard The South Asian Forum for Human
Rights Report, November 2002 reports:

“The decoupling of social and political conflicts has a critical impact on the way
the event of armed struggle or war is covered, but not its root cause. It makes
conflict appear normal and inevitable and irresolvable. Given the transformation
of the regional mass media into a complex, expensive, centralized and
commercial model of communication, it seems almost anachronistic to talk of
the intrinsic relationship between an independent media and substantive
democracy. In a commercialized information environment where news is
professionally produced as commodity and the boundaries between information and entertainment have collapsed in the race for ratings, it seems out of the place to talk of the social and moral responsibility of the journalist. Given the ‘power’ and ‘interests’ which inhere in the structure of the new mass media, concerns about manipulation and ‘manufacturing consent’ seem decidedly old fashioned” (Thukral 34)

Not only in the countries under military or civilian dictatorship, even in democracies where a nation state is pitted against insurgent movements or militant activities yearning for national self-assertion or other internal movements articulating social or economic conflicts, media by and large become adjunct to the national security apparatus. Threat to the nation state is the slogan and most newspapers follow the line given by the political class. The national security mindset of the dominant elite class that characterizes such conflicts as threat to the integrity of nation state is mostly accepted without much protest. These conflicts are characterized as law and order problem and majority of the mainline media accepts this position. The national security psyche gets internalized and is faithfully projected by the media. The traditional adversarial role which media plays or is supposed to play is given a departure. But not everyone follows this. Indeed there are exceptions.

**Newspaper and Reportage of “Violence”**

It is reasonable to say that violence has an enduring presence within the fabric of our human world. Its space of occurrence ranges from the most daily expressions to those of exceptional cases, which are specific to the phenomenon of war. The topic of Genocide emerged as a field of scholarly inquiry as historians, political scientists and other social scientists began analyzing the causes and methods of Nazi violence in the years after World War II. It was an interest that was reinforced by public fascination with Nazism and Fascism. Nevertheless, this was a slow and uneven process: most early researches on genocide was devoted solely to the Nazi extermination of Europe’s Jews and few studies sought to place the holocaust in comparison with other cases of mass violence elsewhere in the world.
The symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism/political violence has been the subject of several studies (Schmid and de Graaf 1982; Schlesinger et al. 1983; Schlesinger 1991; Weimann 1994). There is a constant struggle between state and non-state actors to ensure that their versions are prominently covered by the news media. Given the close relationship between the news media and political violence, Hansen’s (Hansen 19) underlines “politics as permanent performance” that is useful to understand and unpack major contemporary events. Journalists negotiate a minefield of situations while covering conflict. Their own religious and cultural identities are often called into question – even if it is not to their liking. The culture of intolerance or dissent even makes the mere presence of reporters resulting in the messenger himself or herself becoming a target of attack. For example, the coverage of the Gujarat riot (2002) marked a departure in the way the Indian media approached communal clashes. It also highlighted the disjuncture in the news cultures of the English-language news media and the non-English variety. In this context, Windmiller (1954) observed that India’s English language press is the only national press and is paramount in the world of “Indian journalism” (Windmiller 313–315). It is also true that this was one of the many instances where the English-language press’ disconnect with the wider Indian realities showed up. It will be incorrect to generalize that the entire English-language press is balanced and impartial or that the non-English language press is biased and one-sided. There are instances of biased reporting in the former and instances of impartial reporting by the latter. But, during events of such magnitude – such as the events after the mosque demolition in Ayodhya – influential sections of the non-English language press are known to have provided biased coverage while major sections of the English-language press made efforts to provide critical reporting by covering different versions.

As such, the role of media in understanding the nature of violence is crucial. It helps in defining its own role also. And, if the journalists are able to conceptualize and contextualize terrorism, they are in a better position to present before the public the issues of violence, terrorism, ethnic violence, militancy and war. Media helps the public to deliberate on these issues with a better perspective.

For the International community, at times, wars, violence of different types and deadly conflicts take place in far off areas. Every nation is concerned with what happens close by. Here the role of the journalists becomes all the more important. These deadly conflicts have complicated histories; the International view of them will depend to a large extent on how the media presents and explains the conflict. The
Commission’s report then refers to several deadly conflicts across the globe and what role the media played. “A number of examples in the 1990s suggest that the impact of media reporting may generate political action. In Somalia, vivid images of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu were broadcast around the world and this played a role in the precipitous American withdrawal from that country. In Bosnia, while many episodes of violence occurred over four years, those that were widely covered by the media, such as the marketplace bombing in Sarajevo in 1994, directly influenced responses from the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations” (Carnegie Commission Report 121). Therefore, the issue of covering violence or how media should handle conflict remains central to any understanding of media’s symbiotic relations with violence. Johan Galtung (2000), a Swedish professor of Peace Studies, has laid out points of concern where journalism often goes wrong while reporting violence:

1. **Decontextualising Violence**: Focusing on the irrational without looking at the reasons for unresolved conflicts and polarization. In the Indian context, newspapers do try to put their reports and comments in some context, though not always. But the major news agencies, the Press Trust of India and United News of India in their competition and in the tearing hurry under which they normally operate, forget the context. Competition and the normal working style where the reporters have to rush through their copy critically check the reports from providing context to the reporting of violent events. It is their copy that a large number of newspapers and radio networks use. However, in most cases of daily count of incidents and statements, the context was often forgotten.

2. **Dualism**: Reducing the number of parties in a conflict to two, when often more are involved. Stories that just focus on internal developments often ignore such outside or “external” forces as foreign Governments and transnational corporations.

3. **Manichaeism**: Portraying one side as “good” and demonizing the other as “evil.” If we look at the newspapers in India and Pakistan in the context of coverage of Kashmir imbroglio, it is “patriotism” that largely guides the media. In fact, radio and official networks compete fiercely in branding each other as propagandist. Both sides indulge in newspeak. For Pakistan’s mainline media, the Kashmiri militants or Pakistani infiltrators are Jihadis,
freedom fighters; Indian media on the contrary takes them as terrorists and killers or hired agents. Serious journalists are always concerned about this kind of approach.

4. **Armageddon**: Presenting violence as inevitable, omitting alternatives. This is a normal tendency, particularly among the media, which claim to represent nationalism and the interest of the state. It is true when vital interests are hit hard by the terrorist violence. For example, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 most newspapers in the US fell to the propaganda of the Bush administration that except attacking Afghanistan first and Iraq later there were no alternatives, as did some of the media across the continents.

5. **Confusion**: Focusing only on the conflict arena (i.e. the battlefield or location of violent incidents) but not on the forces and factors that influence the violence. Excluding and omitting the bereaved, and never explaining whether there are acts of revenge that have led to spiraling of violence.

6. **Failure to explore the causes of escalation and the impact of media coverage on violence**: It is another key reason which makes media move away from its basic premise of reporting in a neutral fashion or creating an atmosphere for peace.

7. **Failure to explore the goals of outside interventionists**: Especially big powers often lead to skewed understanding of conflicts and the resultant violence. Failure to explore peace proposals and offer images of peaceful outcome only means that no wholesome effort is there to go beyond the rut of reporting violent events.

8. **Omitting reconciliation**: Conflicts tend to re-emerge if attention is not paid to efforts to heal fractured societies. When news about attempts to resolve conflicts is absent, fatalism is reinforced. That can help engender even more violence since the people have no images or information about possible peaceful outcomes and the promise of healing.

Media critics assert that objectivity is a myth. It is not possible as journalists are political actors and cannot be neutral observers. Interpretation and judgment are inherent in all reporting. Upton Sinclair (2002) says, “When you pick up your morning newspaper or evening newspaper and think you are reading the news of the world, what
you are reading is propaganda which has been selected, revised, and doctored by some power which has a financial interest in you” (Sinclair 262). This could be true when media is reporting armed conflict; here the interests are different and often more than financial. It could be to subvert public opinion to the requirements of the state or by the militants to suit their propaganda needs. In any violent situation, the first and the main source for information are the security forces. Journalists largely depend upon sources inside the security set-up. The details about the violent incidents and the context are provided by the police, para-military outfits or by the armed forces. Most of the time, this kind of coloured information presents a partisan story from the point of view of the security forces. It is natural. But this way the job of the journalists to find the truth becomes very difficult. By their very nature, single source news stories are dicey. There could be deliberate leaks, plants and heavy dose of disinformation. Alternative sources for collection of information are important, but difficult given the hierarchical and highly regimented nature of security organizations. Outside the security outfits, there are either political leaders or the militants and sometimes eyewitnesses that can provide some leads and hard information too. While the militants are an interested party and would stick to their point of view, they mostly remain anonymous and rarely available in person. They might ring up a journalist or a media house or their sympathizers might like to go to the press. It is rare that journalists are able to meet these invisible fighters face to face. But sometimes this happens. Whenever this happens, it is mostly to seek publicity and these are well-calculated moves on the part of the militant leaders. However, McLuhan (1964) has a different perception on the role media played as part of publicity and how ownership determined its content. “As forms, the media, the book and the newspaper would seem to be as incompatible as any two media could be. The owners of media always endeavor to give the public what it wants; because they sense that their power is in the medium and not in the message or the programme” (McLuhan 239). His observations on media and his theoretical understanding of different types of media and technology had a profound impact on the thinking about the newspapers, radio and television, besides other modes. But, somewhere he has been carried away when commenting what determines the content. What appears in the newspapers, radio and TV is not determined by the readers, listeners or viewers. The content is determined by the patterns of ownership, structure of a particular kind of media, ideology or business interests of the publishers and editors. In addition, the advertisers and the Government also play their role in determining the content of the media. In the case of
reporting terrorism and war or even ethnic violence, journalists depend to a great extent on official briefings. Most of the time what happens in Kashmir or other troubled spots across the country is reported, based on briefings in Delhi or other headquarters of the security forces. It is sometime a matter of logistics. The reporters cannot reach the spots or have no access otherwise or are even denied access by the security forces. This needs to be appreciated. But majority of the Indian newspapers have developed a style of working over the years that depends heavily on official sources only. It is a common practice to rely on either Home or Defense Ministry, which have their own kind of versions. The bulk of newspapers do not have their own reporters in the troubled areas. They depend on news agencies: *Press Trust of India* or *United News of India* and these agencies depend again on the official versions. Much of the news space is filled by the copy of the news agencies like Reuters, AP and such other organizations. Also, the very survival of these news agencies depends on the subsidy or service charges from the Government. Much of their budgetary support comes from the Union or State Governments. The versions of the Government, the political bosses and security forces are taken as impartial and hard news. Second line of sources is rarely built or tapped. Official leaks or plants provide what Indian reporters call exclusive reporting. Intelligence agencies work on the reporters and often provide tainted and coloured versions, which are displayed in a big way next day under bylines. One impact of such newsgathering and presentation to the readers, listeners and viewers is that the media organizations are losing credibility. It is no longer impartial and objective as it should be. Interestingly, many countries including China, Pakistan and others have state owned news agencies. Even, Karl Marx while discussing the role of newspapers analyzed the distortions of the monopoly press in terms of power play of classes and found it against the interest of the people. He wrote, “to say that the newspaper press represents public opinion is to administer insult to intelligent men. It is the property of speculators, political leaders, large contractors and railway directors” (Thukral 108).

Most newspapers in India owe their existence either to big business tycoons, corporate houses or to the political establishments. For business houses, the motive always is profit maximization and political power brokering. These factors guide them all including selection of staff, particularly at the higher decision making echelons and selection and presentation of news and views. The altruistic consideration of presenting wholesome news objectively and honestly is nowhere on the agenda. Journals owned or
managed by the political parties need not bother about presenting any neutral point of view. They are clearly into the propaganda business. The well-known political thinker Harold Laski (1925) emphasized the importance of information and the role of media in his *A Grammar of Politics* (1925). He wrote, “A belief without reliable news is, sooner or later, a belief without the basis of freedom” (Laski 147). Clearly, the role of newspapers is very important in dissemination of information, but if these are motivated by profit and power alone and ignore the public sphere journalism, the role is vitiated.

To understand the role that media plays in the reporting of any violent incident let us look into some examples to elaborate on the point further:

1. Apartheid

During apartheid in South Africa, many mainstream print media and the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) portrayed violence in very particular ways. These often served to reinforce racist stereotypes and justify state violence. Violence was often typified as "black on black" violence, as if somehow it was endemic for black people to attack black people simply because of their race. In doing so, the explanation or description served to simplify and hide bigger and far-reaching political and societal reasons for the violence. It also served to further dehumanise those involved: if black people could attack black people simply because of their race, the implication was that black people themselves were prone to violence. By contrast, when the police force or defence forces acted, it was framed as being in defence of public property and to restore law and order.

2. The Rwanda Case

Another case in point is that of the Rwanda genocide (7 April-July 1994). The press has existed in Rwanda only since 1933, when the first newspaper was established, a newspaper still published by the Catholic Church, which is a very important institution in Rwanda. Decades later, in the 1960s, a Government newspaper was set up. Both of these were published in Kinyarwanda, or in the native language of Rwanda. Other attempts to create newspapers were short-lived until 1991, when there was a kind of democratic explosion, and a large number of newspapers were established.

The news media both domestic and international played a crucial role in the 1994 Rwanda genocide. There was a strange dichotomy of local media, on one side, fuelling the killing while international media, on the other side, virtually
ignored or misunderstood what was happening. The local media, particularly the extremist radio station *Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines* (RTLM), were literally part of the genocide. Those who committed genocide used the media like a weapon. The haunting image of killers with a machete in one hand and a radio in the other never leaves you. The international media initially affected events by their absence. Major news agencies devoted fewer resources to Africa to begin with and virtually ignore small countries like Rwanda, which is deemed to be of little strategic value. There is no context, no general understanding of situations like the one that evolved in Rwanda. When there is a lack of statesmanship, public opinion can force a Government to make decisions. Getting information out to the general population and holding decision-makers accountable by continuously berating them about what is going on and what they are doing or not doing is more critical than a few talk shows and a couple of newscasts. In the case of Rwanda, that’s where the process broke down. In Rwanda from mid-April to the beginning of May, only a handful of international reporters were on the ground to witness the genocide. In Rwanda’s print media of the 1990s, the publication that had the most impact on the country was the bimonthly newspaper *Kangura*. It was well known for its hysterical hatred of Tutsis. Established in May 1990, and headed from beginning to end by Mr Hassan Ngeze, *Kangura* soon became famous for its publication of what was commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments of the Bahutu. Through these commandments, the paper strongly exhorted the Bahutu to understand that the Tutsi were first and foremost an enemy and that they should break all ties with them, whether those links derived from marriage, business or professional relations.

In the early 2000s not only was violence being reported, but also it was an integral component of a crime wave seen to be sweeping the country. The media picked up on it, as did political parties. Citizens were portrayed as victims of ruthless criminals and a discourse of victimhood pervaded. It is important to note that this is a pattern. It is not one item that does this; it happens again and again over a period of time. Victimhood is rooted in fear and has a historical context that is often linked to crime. The problem with representing people as just victims or as victims-in-waiting is that it does not leading to greater understanding or even action.
As such, it can be safely deduced that several events of political violence can be best understood as spectacles on television. CNN’s coverage that brought the 1991 Gulf War to our drawing rooms was perceived by many as a video game war or a Hollywood movie. The defining image of September 11 for millions outside New York is the spectacular television footage of the planes ploughing into the twin towers. Political violence makes for riveting television, which partly explains why news organizations around the world invest millions covering wars and conflicts. In 2003, the coverage of the Iraq conflict by “embedded journalists” made as much news as the conflict itself. On such occasions, the medium itself becomes the message.

The Indian Press and Reportage of Violence

The print media includes press and the word ‘press’ technically denotes the newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, etc. The press in our country was a pillar of national strength and aspirations until the early 1930s. It kept itself largely away from the virus of communalism or religious fanaticism. Now much of this seems to be washed out. The media, especially the press play important role in fomenting the communal violence at all stages including: (i) the planning and rehearsal; (ii) the instigation of riots and (iii) the interpretation phase. In Independent India, the regional press has played a crucial role in the projection of Hindu-Muslim communal violence. This was however not so during the freedom struggle, but its attitude changed after independence. After the partition, the language newspapers adopted an anti-Muslim bias in reporting communal violence. On the other hand, the English press still occupies the pre-eminent position; its approach to communal problems is much more sedate and sober than that of the language press. Particularly, the language newspapers have played an important role in disseminating raw prejudices against Muslims and have also published provocative materials against them. We also see gross discrimination when it comes to penalizing people for inciting communal feelings. For example, The Marathi daily Saamna has been regularly publishing inflammatory material. It is unfortunate that during the period of communal violence, some sections of our so-called “National Press” have also aggravated the tense situation by publishing irresponsible reports. Even during the Jabalpur riots (1961), a local Hindi news paper carried a headline that in a particular mosque there is a transmitter and they are receiving instructions from
Pakistan on that instrument. The police officials and others rushed to the mosque but did not find anything, but the damage was already done. Another story that a Hindu unmarried girl, Usha Bhargava was raped by a Muslim youth turned out to be equally false. The story was highlighted by the local Hindi daily, the Yugadharma, a Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) paper, and picked up by other newspapers in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and outside, while there were other rumours with their own versions. Because of these unfortunate reporting, the communal violence had spread throughout Jabalpur and beyond it. A team of senior journalists from Bombay (now renamed Mumbai) investigated the Jabalpur riots and mainly blamed the Hindi press for provocation. According to S.B. Kolpe, “…I found that two or three strangers working jointly for several national dailies were responsible for these reports, which had a damaging effect on the political life of the nation as a whole. Only one of the three knew enough English to write readable reports. The others copy these with minor changes” (Engineer 264)

As such, newspapers sometimes play a part in the opening phase of communal violence by spreading news that originates from the riot network. Thus, for example, Banerjee (Brass 345) notes, “the Jabalpur riots of 1961…were sparked off by the news of a Hindu girl disappearing with a Muslim boy.” Nobody authenticated the news but everyone believed in it. In other societies, an event such as an elopement would not be considered “news” at all. However, it is obvious that reporting of such an event in India is inflammatory and political parties seeking to spread inter-communal violence or tension provide fire to the fuel.

The effect of these acts of violence depicted in the media tends to divide people into opposing camps. Some believe that there is a causal link between the media’s portrayal of violence and violence in society. Others argue that there is a multiplicity of causes of violence in society, with no straightforward link between what is portrayed in the media and the actions of individuals. However, the debate itself reveals compelling evidence for both sides. Studies show how media violence has contributed to greater violence but also show media to have a minimal impact alongside the multiplicity of other causes on violence. The debate has been raging in many countries for decades and there seems to be no imminent resolution.

Politics and political violence in India are framed against the shifting quicksand of religion, caste, community, language, gender, region and individuals belonging to influential groups or families. As Nandy (Nandy 58) observed, “It is possible to
interpret the political process in India as a continuing attempt to reconcile older categories of thought and social character to the demands of nation-building and political culture as a complex of continuities." Generating collective moods, particularly during elections, has been a key method of political mobilization. More often than not, such mobilization also involves violence – indeed, violence has been central to electoral politics in northern states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Today in states across Asia, a range of different forms of violent political transactions operate through the mass media. This includes separatist movements driven by various ethnic, nationalist and religious factors; revolutionary groups seeking to subvert the state; inter-communal violence; and terrorist groups pursuing a variety of national and regional objectives. The majority of these conflicts are indigenous in nature, involving national groups seeking specific national objectives, although the interconnections between combatant groups in different countries in Asia were progressively strengthened during the 1990s, partly as a result of the expansion of the Al Qaeda network (Cole 1). The nature, origin and trajectory of these conflicts are often very different, but what each type of conflict has in common is the role that the media plays as an interlocutor between the Government, combatants and society.

To elaborate in the Indian context on the debate, let us look closely at the Godhra Riots (2002) and its reportage by various sections of the Indian press:

**Case: The Godhra Riot (2002)**

In 2002, during the Godhra riots, the coverage by the print media in English and Gujarati language made news when sections of the press (Gujarati-language dailies *Sandesh & Gujarat Samachar*) covered the events from a pro-Hindutva perspective while others (*The Times of India and Indian Express*) were severely critical of the attacks against Muslims. The Godhra incident occurred on 27th February and was reported extensively the next day. But, news channels and newspaper editors devoted more time and space to the Union Budget that was presented in the Indian parliament in New Delhi on 28 February. The budget coverage pushed Godhra to the margins.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian news media followed a set of guidelines formulated by the Press Council of India¹, a quasi-judicial watchdog organization,

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¹ Norms of Journalistic Conduct published by Press Council of India, 2010 edition on how to cover communal disputes, clashes and violence is in the appendices
stipulating that the identity of victims or attackers should not be mentioned in news reports to prevent further escalation of communal violence. The guidelines were drawn up against the backdrop of colonial India’s partition into independent India and Pakistan in 1947 and the tense Hindu–Muslim relations that accompanied it. There was as yet no television, and, until the transistor revolution of the 1970s, even radio was confined to the affluent sections of the society. When Gandhi was shot dead on 30 January 1948, the second sentence on All India Radio’s news bulletin was that the killer was not a Muslim. The editor of the bulletin wanted to nip any rumours in the bud, and the speedy announcement that Gandhi’s assailant was not a Muslim prevented attacks against the millions of Muslims that had chosen not to migrate to the new (Islamic) state of Pakistan. But the ban on naming communities in the news media never really worked. The identity of the victims and attackers was all too evident when news reports used euphemistic phrases such as “members of a particular community” or “members of the minority community” (meaning Muslims) or “members of the majority community” (meaning Hindus). For decades, both the privately owned press and the Government controlled electronic media adhered to the guidelines. Varadarajan (1999) argued that “the convention of not identifying communities works to increase the sense of suspicion and anxiety amongst ordinary citizens not just in riot-affected areas but also elsewhere in the country . . . people tend to assume that the victims are ‘their own’ while their attackers are ‘the other’” (Varadarajan 160–229). While covering Gujarat 2002, television journalists openly identified the attackers and victims in their voice-overs as the footage showed graphic images of violence. A.J. Phillip(2002) observed that “the television camera focuses on a riotous mob or its victims, it leaves little to the imagination of the viewers . . . The ban on naming the communities was a fit case for review, although with the advent of television it has become redundant. Questions also remain whether the guidelines are applicable to the electronic media . . . (The) argument that the violence in Gujarat would have been worse if the media, particularly electronic, had not aroused public opinion against the killing spree through focused and sustained reporting cannot be dismissed out of hand (Cole 89). Television coverage of the events made it impossible to adhere to the Press Council guidelines. Television journalists such as Rajdeep Sardesai and Barkha Dutt of Star News identified attackers and victims as “Hindus” and “Muslims.” However, as Varadarajan (275) pointed out, it was improper to use the term “Hindus” to describe what was usually a politically mobilized mob: “The discourse of communal riots had no room to acknowledge that some Hindus
brought together by political or economic motivation to attack Muslims at large cannot really be referred to as “the Hindus” or even as “some Hindus.” Naming the attackers as “Hindus” also concealed the reality that the overwhelming majority of Indians who happen to be categorized as Hindus – practicing or non-practicing – have been vociferous in their criticism of the attacks against Muslims. Referring to the practice of not naming communities, Sardesai observed that “no one is quite sure who initiated this practice, but . . . it does seem a bit like obfuscation, and an attempt to inject a false blandness to the harsh and grim reality of a communal riot. If a shop of a Bohra Muslim has been attacked, should that be disguised by suggesting that a shop belonging to ‘a member of a minority within the minority community’ was attacked? (Cole 90). The graphic coverage by television channels hit the headlines, but the nature of the press coverage also made news. The team of the Editors Guild of India met several editors, journalists, Chief Minister Modi and others and concluded that the English-language national press and sections of the Gujarati media, barring notable offenders, played an exemplary role. The charge of the BJP and its allies that graphic coverage by the news media was a major aggravating factor in the situation, the team concluded, it was “specious, self-serving and must be dismissed” (Cole 93). The team observed: “(Our) finding is that the prompt and extensive portrayal by sections of the local press and national media of the untold horrors visited on innocent people in the wake of the Godhra carnage was a saving grace. The exposure of the supine if not complicit attitude of the State and manifest outpourings of communal hatred, stirred the conscience of the nation, compelled remedial action, howsoever defensively and belatedly . . . However, the role of sections of the Gujarati media, especially the Gujarat Samachar and more notably Sandesh, was provocative, irresponsible and blatantly violative of all accepted norms of media ethics. This cannot be lightly passed over” (Cole 93). Being the largest selling dailies in the state, coverage by the Gujarat Samachar (Circulation: 810,000) and Sandesh (Circulation: 705,000) had considerable impact. The editors’ team found several instances of distorted and false reporting in the two dailies, but the team also found that because of Sandesh’s pro-Hindutva stand, its circulation rose by 150,000 copies. A study of the Sandesh coverage found that when Muslims were at fault, names were mentioned and perpetrators clearly identified. But when Muslims were the victims of murderers, arsonists, looters etc., the attackers remained unnamed. The study concluded: “No sources were quoted for headlines, even when they were simply lifted from speeches by VHP leaders. Headlines were also misleading, and often followed up
by reports that did not substantiate, and even negated the headlines completely . . . The anti-minority stand was obvious in the slant in news reporting” (PUCL 2). *Sandesh* used headlines to “provoke, communalize and terrorize people” (PUCL 1). For example, on 28th February, the main headline read: *70 Hindus Burnt Alive in Godhra*. Another report on the front page said: “Avenge Blood with Blood” that was actually a quote from a statement issued by a VHP leader, but the newspaper simply used the words as a headline. On 6th March, the headline was: “Hindus Beware: Haj Pilgrims return with a Deadly Conspiracy”, when the fact was that hundreds of terrified Haj pilgrims had returned to Gujarat under the protection of a police escort. The study found that most news reports of the post-Godhra violence in *Sandesh* began with the sentence: In the continuing spiral of communal rioting that broke out as a reaction to the demonic/barbaric Godhra incident, the study observed: “The denunciatory adjectives used liberally to describe the Godhra incident were strikingly absent in reporting the subsequent genocide” (PUCL 3). The study found that the *Gujarat Samachar* also played a role in heightening tensions. But unlike *Sandesh*, it did not devote all its space to “hawkish and inflammatory reportage in the first few weeks, and did carry reports highlighting communal harmony” (PUCL 6). On the other hand, *Gujarat Today*, a Gujarati-language daily started by Muslim liberals, was praised for its balanced and restrained reporting of the events.

Now, to contextualize it further, let us glimpse into the reportage pattern as exhibited during the Assam Movement (1979-85):

**Assam Movement**

In the context of Assam, particularly during the Assam movement from 1979-1985, the regional media took an ambivalent position while reporting the violent incidents of 1983. Assamese media was also involved in the modernist programme of the Government of India and therefore we cannot talk Assamese nationalism bypassing the broader Indian Nationalism in this context. During the peak of the Assam movement, the press played a significant role in strengthening the movement by defining its enemy within and outside. The ambivalence played by the Assamese media led to silencing of certain violent events where a positive image was created for the leaders and supporters and a negative image for the opponents and non-supporters. Most of the highly circulated newspaper published from Guwahati and Jorhat were
owned mostly Assamese middle class. Hence, the ambivalence between profit making and maintaining an ideology to support the movement raised an important question “What and whose purpose does it serve?” During the 1983 elections to the State legislature, the Assamese press played a vicious role. The newspapers were flooded with news of the arrival of Bangladeshi in Assam through helicopters and rivers to attack the indigenous people and their villages. The press avoided taking a critical stand except few opinion pages like Hiren Gohain’s Kalakhar, Syed Alam Bora’s Janakranti and few others. Another weekly news paper, Sadiniya Nagarik edited by Homen Buragohain in the early stage of the movement took a democratic and secular position, unlike the Assamese middle class press. When the sectarian and divisive role played by the Assamese middle class press became clear, a good number of democratic and progressive individuals came together collectively to form a new cultural organization Gana Sanskriti Bikash Samity and started publishing a new Assamese weekly tabloid Saptahik Janajivan under the editorship of Nirupoma Buragohain. It would be worth mentioning here that Mrs Buragohain was forced to leave Saptahik Janajivan because she dared to express her resentment against the treatment meted out to the non-Asamiya victims of the North Kamrup carnage.

During the Assam Movement, one interesting turn that took place was the decline of high caste members within the ranks of the Congress party. With that the Assamese middle class press changed their editorial approach (Hussain 136). They started deviating from the largely nationalist ideology to the intransigent nativist ideology with strong anti-Left tendencies. But during the Janata wave in 1977 -78, they responded positively as there was no visible regional party to represent class interest. Later on with the crumbling Janata Party, the press went in for popularizing localism that suited an ideologically guided Assamese ruling class. Gradually the major dailies of Assam viz. Dainik Asam, Asam Bani took a pro- Janata stand and later transformed their stand to pro-Assamese.

In 1983, when Assam experienced unprecedented crisis in the wake of elections to the state legislature and curbs were imposed on the normal activities, the number of blasts and victims increased drastically. On 18 Feb 1983, over 3000 people who belonged to religious minority were butchered by neighboring tribes at Nellie about 70 kms from Guwahati. The incident attracted a lot of national and international media attention. Unfortunately, there was very less reporting and analysis of the massacre in the Assamese media. On the following day of the massacre, the regional dailies had no
news of the massacre except for a single column in *The Assam Tribune* newspaper. In the entire episode of the Assam movement, the principle of exclusion guided by the movement leaders and supported by the section of Assamese media led to violence. The Assamese nationalism that was invoked across the state except in the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong was mostly through the use of regional newspapers. It was moreover quite exclusive unlike Indian nationalism that calls for accommodative policies. Hence, there was an ambivalence to the inclusive principle inherited from the idea of India, but within that concept when there was tremendous subterranean forces attempting to manufacture an exclusive agenda among the Assamese that gave rise to multiple issues in the Assamese society vis a vis the nation. Here, the media acquired an edge to sensationalize ongoing issues during the Assam movement. The sensationalisation created by the press contributed to the rise of violence that targeted a particular community across the state resulting in indiscriminate violence.

**Conclusion**

The amount of violence that takes place in the world in the 21st century creates a challenge for the news organizations. They must determine how much information, if any, to share with the audience. Not all events that occur will become news and as such, not each violent incident will receive coverage. Those that do receive coverage are assigned a level of newsworthiness by television producers, newspaper editors, and other media executives that determine where and how the events are presented. Some of the considerations involved in such a decision include the journalistic style of the media organization, its intended target audience, and whether coverage of the event will increase ratings or sales.

The news is essentially a product that media outlets want to sell to consumers. Following the economic principle of supply and demand, this creates a need to produce news both quickly and efficiently. The media rely on a number of official sources, which may include law enforcement and criminal justice personnel. These sources serve a number of functions. First, they are able to provide the media with consistent and credible information. Second, they are able to provide the information at a limited cost or time. These factors also contribute to the decisions regarding which stories become the most newsworthy and which stories receive less or even on coverage. Constructing news is a dynamic, fluid, and ongoing process. When a story breaks, media
organizations collect information, construct the story, and disseminate it to the public. From there, members of the public consume the story and then relay their approval or disapproval back to the media organization. If the audience favours a particular story, the media organizations will likely continue to produce stories on the same or on a similar topic in an effort to keep the audience interested. However, if there is disapproval from a large contingent of the news consumers, the media organizations may turn to other stories.

Further, rise of nation states in the late 19th century provided another impetus to violence and wars as states pursued aggressive agenda to expand or protect their territories and sovereignty. Two major World Wars and smaller wars declared or undeclared, and countless armed clashes have caused large-scale deaths running into several millions and all around destruction of human and material wealth. Science and technology with its weapons of mass destruction have become hand maiden to man’s propensity for destruction of life and environment. When so much is involved in any violent conflict and war, information about them is naturally hard to come by. Those who operate the war machines and those who supervise such operations have a strong, long established predisposition to withhold information or tailor it to suit their requirements. In defense establishments what goes on there is closely guarded. There is always some kind of debate that goes on how much public must be told. Information has always been treated as part of the weaponry.

The fact remains that the way violent conflicts the media must report on has changed. Violent conflict is increasingly a lawless and terrifying exploitation of civilians and resources by poorly trained soldiers or paramilitary forces or private armies engaged in crime to sustain their violence. State authority and the rule of law are mostly weak. The low-intensity violence recurs erratically. The news media, with its new technologies and wider reach, is increasingly indulging in misinformation, manipulation or suppression having interests seeking to profit from the violent conflict.

Moreover, in the era of media proliferation, the importance of the news has increased. The proliferation of television channels and growing viewership, rising literacy and the increasing circulation of newspapers indicate that barring notable exceptions of blatant bias, the Indian news media will continue to play the role of a watchdog in the world’s largest democracy. Since the early 1990s, there are apprehensions that the news media will not be able to highlight the abuse of power or signify weaknesses in society due to the gnawing march of corporatization (Sonwalkar
But, the bold and independent coverage of Gujarat 2002 provides ground for some hope because Indian journalism’s ability to hold the state accountable, when power is abused, has not been obliterated by infotainment yet.

In Independent India, it is obvious that the media has been deeply implicated in the production of communal violence. It has been found that certain types of media elements have highlighted minority communities particularly Muslims on communal lines. Besides the political class and related segments of Indian society have contributed to communal violence time and again. Some media houses have been charged with manifesting communal frenzy along with politicians among the various communities. Once communal violence breaks out it is the responsibility of media to deescalate the situation. Media is the main source of information regarding the occurrence of communal violence. People are influenced by what they read and what they see on screen. In the context of communal violence, media has a strong pull on mass awareness. Instruments of media play very important role for communal propaganda and persuasion-messages. What is required is an ethical and non-partisan reporting on such events of human tragedy. It is hoped that Indian media shall rise up to the occasion and serve the people with the message of peace and harmony.