

Strengthening South Asia Media Solidarity Network – Some possible future strategies

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There are two issues that confront an attempt to build media solidarity around freedom of the press, safety of journalists and trade union issues in South Asia. They are:

1. Lack of information
2. Lack of broad coalitions of concerned groups within and across countries

I intend to take up these issues briefly and make a few suggestions on what can be done to address these problems. My focus will not be any particular country but the region that constitutes South Asia.

Information:

What journalists in one country in South Asia know about the condition of the press in the others is purely anecdotal or based on reports of acute crisis situations.

Anecdotal information is often inaccurate but serves the purpose of alerting others of the crisis. Acute crisis situations tend to get reported in the press. The use of large-scale violence against media practitioners (such as the attack on Geo TV offices, the killing and kidnapping of journalists in Pakistan's tribal areas) or invoking state censorship (such as through PEMRA – Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) or attempts by the State to control media content (such as through the proposed Broadcast Authority Bill in India) are reported to some extent in the press.

Chronic problems journalism and journalists do not get the same publicity.

Unless one is on the mailing list of IFJ or some other international organization dealing with freedom of the press and protection of journalists, one would never know what the chronic problems of the media in any one of the South Asian countries was. The only exception is perhaps the Sri Lanka Free Media Movement which continues to make a valiant effort through its emails and its internet site to bring to the attention of the world the grave crisis facing journalists in the island.

If one does not travel across to the other countries – and that is not always easy, say, between Pakistan and India or India and Sri Lanka or even Bangladesh and India – one would not know how the other half suffers.

I, for one, would not have known how severe was the crisis that the media faced in Sri Lanka or Pakistan, had I not been part of the IFJ missions there. And even then I had problems getting visas. I was informally advised by some well wishers

– friends in the Pakistani establishment -- to get off the PIA aircraft even when it was on the tarmac readying to take off from Delhi for Lahore. They had already given me a visa as a goodwill gesture when some hardliners in Islamabad told them that they should not have done it. How could they have an Indian -- a journalist from the 'enemy' country -- telling them about freedom of the press and safety of journalists?

Similarly, after the only article I wrote about the conditions in Sri Lanka – including that of the media-- I was advised by some friends that Colombo did not tolerate criticism and that getting a journalist's visa would now become very difficult for me as I was bound to be put on the black-list.

But this story is not about me. It's about how only in exceptional circumstances one gets to know of the prevailing condition of journalism and journalists in one's neighbouring countries. There is no institutionalized and easy sharing of information on the condition of journalists and journalism in South Asia.

A widespread dissemination of information would help raise consciousness and also help in building solidarity.

That Suhail Qalandar News Editor of Daily Express in Peshawar is alive today after being kidnapped for over 50 days, is largely because Pakistani journalists created a nationwide ruckus about his abduction by quickly passing on the information about his kidnapping to all concerned. They agitated on the issue and kept up a constant pressure on the establishment.

Information can save lives -- Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in Economics, tells us. He has argued that this is the difference between democratic societies with free press and totalitarian states where media is controlled; that is why India can manage its famines much more effectively than China.

However, the dissemination of information saves lives not only of victims of famines when we write about them or of those suffering from a natural calamity, it also saves the lives of journalists.

Information saves lives by raising concern locally. It also saves lives by raising concerns internationally. If society at large is made aware of what kind of threats journalists and journalism faces, they speak up for them. International pressure works not only on governments but to some extent on even non-state actors who threaten the media.

That the IFJ sends international missions to various countries to examine the state of journalists and journalism is in itself a major information dissemination strategy besides being pressure tactic. Such missions not only send a message of solidarity, by their very presence in a particular country, they help focus media and state attention to the crisis being faced by journalists. Journalists who are part of these missions bring with them their own experience of dealing such crises elsewhere.

It is obvious, therefore, that the best way of disseminating information on threats to press freedom and condition of journalists – whether of their safety or changing work conditions – is to have a South Asia Media Solidarity Network site on the internet on the lines of the Free Media Movement site of our friend Sunanda Deshapriya. Designated representatives, perhaps paid for by SAMSN, from each of the South Asian countries can uplink information onto the site.

The information that is put on the site can also be emailed to news agencies and media organizations in South Asia so that while journalists get the information on the site newspapers and news agencies could be encouraged to publish or broadcast it.

Building broader coalitions:

What the experience of Sri Lanka and Pakistan shows is that information itself is not enough. There is a need to build broader coalitions of journalists' organizations and other civil society organizations concerned with media freedom and broader democratic issues.

Let me elaborate by contrasting the case of India and Pakistan. In India, we have plethora of journalists' trade unions – they exist at the national level as well at plant level, some have affiliations with political parties of various hues and all of them contest for the already shrinking space for trade union activities in media houses. The press clubs in India have become nothing more than places to get cheap drinks. You can see journalists staggering in and out of the press clubs every afternoon and every evening. I am not for abstinence but Press Clubs should not only be drinking holes.

Then there is no interaction between the so-called all India unions of journalists and even the Editors' Guild of India. So while the Editors' Guild holds its own discussions and seminars on the new Broadcast bill that the government wants to introduce to monitor content on television and radio, the journalists unions neither attend these discussions, even when they are open, nor try and coordinate action with the Editors' Guild.

As for the Editors' Guild, its members are so full of themselves that they would not consider it proper to stoop so low as to include other journalists in their campaigns. They are an elite club after all.

The journalists unions also do not have any meaningful or structured links with any civil liberties organizations. There was a time when journalists not only participated in civil liberties organizations but even led them in India. This was during the mid-seventies when Indira Gandhi had curtailed democratic rights and imposed press censorship. So we know what to do when faced with an acute crisis. But in seemingly normal times, we prefer to live in our own cocoons.

Now consider Pakistan. The PFUJ has formed strong working links with the Press Clubs in all the major cities of the country and with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. It fights the employers on non-implementation of wage

board awards but is politically savvy enough to also join hands with them against Musharraf's attempts to muzzle the press. These are good working relationships which need to be emulated and improved upon in other south Asian countries.

Take the case of Sri Lanka. The Free Media Movement saw its inception in 1991 as a non-partisan group of journalists, editors and media personalities. The common thread binding them was their commitment to freedom of expression, opinion and information. Together they called for an end to government control of the media, restructuring of media institutions, defending the rights of journalists and other media practitioners. Today the Free Media Movement stands for broad principles of democratic and human rights and the need for a pluralistic society in Sri Lanka

Once again, we see the effectiveness of the formation of a broad coalition. I believe the Sri Lanka Free media Movement's success lies in getting over narrow differences to form a broad non-partisan platform whose effectiveness lies in extensive networking with other media freedom and human rights groups locally and internationally.

The lesson here is simple. In each country, we need to form these coalitions.

I believe that these coalitions have to be two kinds:

1. A coalition of various bodies of journalists (say, more like a united front); and
2. A broader coalition of journalists' organizations with human rights organizations, lawyers' organizations, media trade associations, media employers' and editors' organizations – more like a popular front for media freedom.

The second coalition will be less ideologically pure, for want of a better term, but it would not be a less effective coalition. Indeed, its effectiveness will lie in its not being partisan or ideologically homogenous.

It is this second coalition which would be the building block in each country for SAMSUN.

While the coalition of journalists' unions at the level of each country can take up the issues of media freedom, safety of journalists and issues of wages and conditions, I do not think that the broader coalition with human rights organization should be burdened with all the issues. For example, it is pointless involving human rights organizations or other advocacy organizations into the issue of wages and conditions.

The broader coalition should have the common minimum programme of only media freedom and journalists' safety. These two issues touch on the broader issues of democracy and pluralism to which larger parts of society can relate. For example, the Editors' Guild or the Indian Broadcasters Association, an organization of TV network owners, may not have the same view on wage

boards as that of newspaper employees unions or journalists' unions. Human rights organizations may have a priority of fighting for minimum wages for farm and casual workers than higher salaries for journalists.

However, they may all see mutual advantages to working together to tackle threats to the media from the government, from TV signal distributors (cable operators) or extremists. The point I wish to emphasize is that new instruments have to be fashioned to meet new challenges. Journalists unions can be pretty sharp instruments for fighting for decent wages, but coalitions with other groups would act as a force multiplier for fighting state suppression of free expression or threat to media practitioners from state and non-state actors.

(The writer is Editor of Mail Today. These are his personal views and do not in any way represent the views of his newspaper)