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GSA-27
India: The War and the News

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Dear Dick,

During and since the recent India-Pakistan war, a great deal of thought has been given here to the quality of the news coverage of the war by Indian and foreign news media, the press particularly, and of the effectiveness of government information organizations in dispensing the news. The discussion has broken down into roughly three categories: the coverage of the war by the Indian press, the coverage and editorials in the foreign press, primarily in Britain, and the government's news handling. The first category has received little attention and the latter two a great deal.

The treatment of the news in the Indian press (primarily the English language papers), according to an informal survey by a local editor, was reliable but unexciting and in some respects inadequate. Visually, he decided, the war changed makeup and presentation very little. The conservative style of headlines continued and there were few devices like front page boxes in bold face giving late news from the front or of civil defense measures--the latter might have saved Delhi citizens some confusion. The absence of screaming headlines contributed to the relative reliability of the news. The tone of Delhi's papers, although by no means anti-Indian, contrasted favorably to the frenzy that existed, I am told, in the Pakistan press. I've not seen any Pakistan newspapers since early September, but those in August reported goings on in Kashmir with a vivid imagination and little attention to the facts--at least the "facts" as they were visible to me when I was there. The author of the survey and Indian newsmen individually have commented on the dearth of human interest stories from the front or from soldiers in general. There were almost no 'home towners' on the armed forces, and the publicity went to the heroes--pilots who shot down Pak aircraft, a gunner with a good score of Pak tanks, and a few Muslim soldiers who genuinely distinguished themselves and whose exploits the Indians quite understandably made much of. The coverage of the 'civil side' of the war was even weaker, according to the survey. Families bombed out by Pak raids (more by accident than by design, it is believed) were not sought out for human interest stories. Usually only the rough casualty figures were reported and the condolences of some politician. The very important part of commercial transport companies and their civilian truck drivers, often working near the front under fire from

aircraft and artillery, received mention in the press only after the war had been going more than a week. Other efforts made by the civil population, had they been reported, would have given a war 'feel' to the news, several editors have pointed out. And if the daily newspapers lacked space for such stories or for articles analyzing the military situation, there was plenty of space in the Sunday supplements, which, apparently oblivious of the war, continued their chronicles of children, women's ailments, and gardening. This inattention to what could make news, according to one capable Indian newsman, was due largely to the lack of innovative spirit among senior editors and to the dullness of sub-editors. They think they know everything, this man complained, and they don't try to improve.

The two major criticisms of war coverage levelled by Indian pressmen at themselves have been the lack of eyewitness reporting from the front and the lack of sound interpretive comment on the war. Newsmen blame the Government for the lack of eyewitness reporting, and I'll take up the subject later. For the lack of interpretive comment, the newsmen blame themselves and their newspapers. The war correspondent and the defense correspondent (the military expert, the Hanson Baldwin) simply don't exist in India. This, it is agreed, is primarily because India has had only one 'war' for local newsmen to whet their talents on--that in 1962 against the Chinese. But, newsmen point out, with the experience of 1962 and the ever-present possibility of hostilities with China or with Pakistan, the larger newspapers should have started training men for this work several years ago. Even if there were no outright war, the need of reporting on the strategic and tactical situation of opposing armies and of India's own defense preparedness would exist. No editor took the cue, however, and the coverage of the war showed it. No articles, for example, gave the facts and background about the U.S.-Pakistan defense and arms-aid agreements. No article was written between the first and the sixth of September analyzing the Pakistan attack in Chambh and its implications for the security of Kashmir and, even more important, what the likely Indian rejoinder to the attack might be. Although it is now said that the Indian counter-attack toward Sialkot and Lahore was an obvious move, no newspaper said so at the time. And the articles that were written, especially in the early days of the war, about the weapons being used were not very informative. Local journalists and editors now seem agreed that even without staff defense correspondents their war coverage could have been improved by using retired military officers as advisers or as temporary defense correspondents.

The absence of experienced war correspondents also prevented close scrutiny of government communiques for exaggeration and inaccuracy whether wilful or a result of the inexperience in such matters of the government information services themselves. Early communiques, for example, reported as destroyed Pakistan tanks that had only been damaged and could be repaired and used again. And at a later time, a communique reported that the Indian Army was in the outskirts of Lahore because its patrols were across a canal five miles from the city. Communiques and government news handouts also were prone to use colored language,

such as labelling a Pakistan air attack as a "sneak attack" because the Pak planes flew low and tried to avoid engagement with Indian planes. Such things are not new to India, as we know, but here they were rarely challenged. The situation was much worse in the early days of the war. By the end of the second week, one or two Indian newsmen with war experience had returned from foreign assignments and they, along with two or three senior editors and columnists, had challenged the wording of the communiqués, changing the situation a good deal. Government handouts became soberer and the papers more skeptical of what was given them. The army and several newspapers now talk of sending a few journalists to the army's Staff College and of having them undergo other training, so that next time around several newsmen will have at least a routine knowledge of military affairs.

The reporting of the war in the papers, with rare exceptions, was optimistic. Individual newsmen lay this largely to the reliance by their editors on copy from the Press Trust of India (PTI), the country's largest wire service. PTI is sufficiently influenced by the Government so that it is unlikely to carry unfavorable stories and to dig much behind governments handouts, according to journalists. And as the reporters themselves found it almost impossible to get to the front, they were unable to counter with their own views. Also, PTI, and usually the newspapers, carried only Indian claims of success and rarely Pakistan's counter-claims. The roundups of foreign press reaction to the war by PTI and the Government's Press Information Bureau have been strongly criticised by some journalists as so pro-Indian that they misled many readers. Thus when the policy of "X" nation wasn't in accord with the press comment the reader had been seeing from that country he felt that India had been let down or double-crossed. At the best such roundups were bad strategy, these journalists maintain, and at the worst, they led to dangerous self-deception.

The one-sided reporting of the war, although irritating, shouldn't have been surprising, however; this too is not peculiar to India. And had the war gone on longer, the chances are good, I think, that the quality of the coverage and the presentation would have improved. From the Pak invasion of Chamb to the ceasefire was 22 days and that isn't very long, it seems to me, to gear up a country's news apparatus to a war, particularly when Indians had had so little experience with the subject.

The less said the better about the coverage of the war by All India Radio (AIR). Although the number of news broadcasts were increased (to which everyone, including me, listened avidly), the news consisted almost entirely of government handouts, often of the blandest kind. There was almost no analysis, and what there was was inferior, in the opinion of most persons I've talked with. AIR's reporting was much soberer and more balanced than that of Radio Pakistan, however. Most of the criticisms of AIR can be summed up in the words of one of its senior executives, who recently said privately, "There is simply a basic conflict between good broadcasting and the civil service mind." But AIR is more to be pitied than censured, I think.

It has to work within a bureaucracy capricious when it is not leaden, and it is under frequent pressure from members of Parliament. During November, for example, one member berated AIR for broadcasting a panel discussion in which a person on the panel (one of the most respected editors in India) questioned the reliability of certain figures in a communique. Such things should not be allowed to happen, the parliamentarian said.

Foreign press coverage of the war seemed to attract more attention and interest among Indians in Delhi, including journalists, than did the performance of their own press. Reactions to foreign press reports were strong and usually critical, sometimes with reason. The charge usually levelled both by private citizens and by government officials was that the foreign press was 'partisan', meaning that it favored Pakistan. The British press took most of the punishment—and by implication the British Government. "The British were our lightning rod on this one," commented one American Embassy official. The American press received much less criticism, except for Newsweek and Time, especially the latter, which now seem to be cordially hated here. As one American correspondent said, "Time has taken the heat off the rest of us." The Press Institute of India, headed by a respected former journalist and ex-Nieman Fellow, made an informal study of British newspaper reporting from early August (the infiltration of Kashmir) to the end of the war on 24 September. It examined clippings from nine dailies and five weeklies for the period—all British.

First the Press Institute considered the following analysis made by the British High Commission in Delhi on the basis of these clippings:

	<u>News Category</u>	
Pro-Pakistan	15%
Pro-India	24%
Objective	61%
	<u>Comment Category</u>	
Pro-Pakistan	11%
Pro-India	10%
Objective	79%

It concluded that "broadly speaking" the classification seemed "reasonably fair". But the Press Institute made two additional distinctions. It noted that a high percentage of the pro-Pakistan reports were also anti-Indian and concluded that "if an anti-India and anti-Pakistan element were introduced in the classification, the volume of anti-India reports outweighed the volume of anti-Pakistan reports." And it noted further that "judgement on India was freely exercised by reporters in Pakistan (by British reporters, bear in mind). Judgement on Pakistan was suspended by reporters in India."

Here are several examples of reporting cited as tendentious by the Press Institute survey. "It is clear that Pakistan hopes to

bring down the rickety federal house of cards and this may not be idle planning"—the Guardian, 9 September, filed from Pakistan. "The mood of Pakistan is coldly determined, in contrast to the almost hysterical bellicosity of New Delhi"—Daily Telegraph, 10 September, from Pakistan. And two quotations from The Sunday Times, 19 September, from Pakistan: "Indians pilots are inferior to Pakistan pilots and Indian officers' leadership has been deplorable"; "The danger of holy war leading to communal massacre of Muslims inside India comes closer." The claim of biased coverage is also based on the expressions of opinion about Kashmir that are contradictory to the Indian viewpoint. Several examples: "But in the Kashmir dispute she (India) simply seems to be excruciatingly in the wrong. . ."—Guardian, 22 September, editorial. ". . . Search for a settlement (of the Kashmir issue) must therefore start with the recognition that India cannot maintain her claim to total and unconditional sovereignty. . ."—Daily Telegraph, 23 September, editorial. "Independence, but with foreign affairs and defence jointly controlled and guaranteed by India and Pakistan, is now the fairest and most practicable solution"—New Statesman, 17 September. The Press Institute concluded, taking some of the curse off its judgement, that "the British press coverage on the India-Pakistan conflict cannot be adjudged as wholly unfair to India." The Delhi correspondent of The Times decided that there were grounds for the Indian charge of bias. "There nevertheless remains in much British comment on this war a thin but persistent note of malice against India," he wrote.

Accepting these quotations for the sake of argument as rightly or wrongly anti-Indian, it is interesting, I think to go on to three other quotations that the Press Institute survey considered anti-Indian. They are: "The first cardinal principal of the Pakistani President's foreign policy is that his country will not become a satellite of India"—The Observer, date unknown, from Pakistan. "The Indian Army has redeemed its honour. It has effaced the humiliations of the Chinese attack of 1962 and the setback in the Rann of Kutch"—The Sunday Times, 19 September, from Delhi. "The limited military situation now seems overwhelmingly stacked in Pakistan's favour"—Guardian, 5 September, from Pakistan. The first quotation seems to me a simple statement of Ayub's position, which is wholly logical from his standpoint, and is therefore unexceptionable reporting. The phrase "redeemed its honour" in the second quotation shows the correspondent's biased opinion of the Indian Army, according to the Press Institute. Maybe so, but the correspondent was echoing what most Indians I know were saying during the war. The third quotation also seems to me to be reasonable and accurate because it was written during Pakistan's Chambh invasion, when Pakistan had an acknowledged advantage, and before the Indian counter-attack in the Punjab. It is a measure of Indian sensitiveness to foreign press comment that reporting like this should be considered biased by such a responsible organization as the Indian Press Institute.

A survey of American press reporting and comment has not been made here so far as I know. My own experience has been with The New York Times International Edition and one issue of Time magazine. Of the half dozen editorials in the Times during September

dealing with India, Pakistan, and Kashmir, most seemed to me reasonable if unexciting. In several cases, distinctly 'anti-Indian' views were expressed, but these, in general, could be called an honest difference of opinion. Passages in several editorials, however, seem to me questionable, and I quote from two of them. On 2 September an editorial entitled "Brinkmanship in Kashmir" began with the following paragraph:

"In 1947 India and Pakistan fought a war over Kashmir that was finally halted along the present ceasefire line. Now, in 1965, India and Pakistan are once again fighting a minor but potentially very dangerous war over the same state of Kashmir."

An editorial entitled "A Solution for Kashmir" on 24 September contained this sentence: "Pakistan is at fault for initiating armed action in August; but India's responsibility is certainly as great for long ago repudiating the United Nations-proposed plebescite it originally agreed to accept." The paragraph above, I think, makes it appear that India and Pakistan have equally valid title to Kashmir and in 1947 were warring over possession. This is not true, as I believe the background shows (See GSA-26), and in 1965 Pakistan invaded Indian territory and the Indians had a right to do something about it. The sentence from the second editorial ignores entirely Pakistan's nonfulfillment of the pre-conditions for a plebescite upon which the Indian repudiation was based. Even admitting that India's record on the plebescite isn't unblemished, this is a very misleading statement, it seems to me.

In Time's cover story--17 September, Asia Edition--on the India-Pakistan war, two passages of many might be worth mention. One passage has India and Pakistan "clawing" at each other "with U.S. weapons and planes that had been given them for the express purpose of opposing Communist aggression". So far as I am aware, India used no offensive weapons procured from the U.S. as military aid in the war against Pakistan; only American-aid radar was used, and this was used defensively. The second passage says that the Maharaja of Kashmir faced a revolt of his Muslim subjects (the date given is "about 100 years" after 1846) and "opted to join India in return for help in putting down the rebellion. As Indian troops poured in from the south, Pakistani tribesmen came down the mountains in the northwest to help their Moslem brothers." As a writer of fairy stories the author should get an award, but in my history class he'd be marked zero. (Please see GSA-26.)

What were the reasons behind India's 'bad press' during August and September? Some observers ascribed it to a basic pro-Pakistan prejudice among Britons. Others claimed it stemmed from the simple ignorance of visiting journalists. And a dozen other reasons were put forward. But nearly every journalist I know, whether foreign or Indian, would agree that a great measure of the blame falls on the information services of the Government of India because of the way they handled the newsmen and the news.

First about newsmen. There are several dozen resident members of the foreign press corps in Delhi in addition to a hundred

or so relatively senior local journalists. During the war an additional 150 foreign newsmen arrived. The accreditation of these visitors was efficiently done, I have heard, but after that for foreign and Indian journalist alike there was little but confusion. All the newsmen wanted to get eyewitness, action stories. Yet what they got for days at a time were promises of trips to the front. (I base all this on information from several dozen local and foreign newsmen.) When several groups finally were sent, they ended up in towns like Jammu and Amritsar and rarely got to the fighting. The Government of India claimed this was due to its concern for the safety and comfort of the correspondents, but there were other reasons. There was little or no coordination between the head office of the government's Press Information Bureau in Delhi and its representatives in forward towns. In some cases the PIB got its press parties near the front only to find that the army wouldn't cooperate in taking them to the fighting. Army headquarters in Delhi had reportedly left the decision about handling correspondents to the local field commanders and no one at headquarters insisted that the commanders must help the press. Many commanders weren't intransigent, however, and as one Indian newsman said, "The Corps commanders weren't basically unhelpful, but they couldn't do much for us on two hours notice." Once at the front, battle commanders and soldiers were usually very helpful.

Especially handicapped were the TV cameramen. If they didn't get action film, they were competitively dead. A well-regarded Indian cameraman who works for a foreign TV company claimed that TV men got only two good stories in 23 days and that the first TV coverage from the Indian side of the battleline was seen abroad on 14 September. This was largely because cameramen on the Pakistan side were able to get better pictures. There was no realization by the government's press liaison personnel of TV's need for daily news-film bulletins in the same way that newspapers need them. TV cameramen, and other newsmen, also had trouble with local police when working near the front. Their press cards were not honored and they had to waste time resisting anxious patriots who thought they were spies or interlopers. The only correspondents who operated with something like consistent ease or success were the PTI and AIR correspondents, whose presence had been specially arranged for. This meant that news was available in India, but narrowly channelled, and, generally speaking, this arrangement was as unsatisfactory to Indian newspapermen as it was to foreign journalists. And while newsmen were waiting to get to the front, they found few sources of war news in Delhi other than official briefings. As a substitute to action coverage, the Government did not see that they had high level briefings or interviews with ranking military officers or were taken to meet soldiers and officers just returned from the front to get accounts of the fighting. This was a burden particularly on visiting newsmen, who couldn't be expected to find alternative sources of copy as easily as residents.

The situation in Pakistan was reportedly much different, especially in the early days of the war. During the invasion of Chamb from 1-6 September foreign correspondents were in the thick of the fighting, whereas on the Indian side no foreign correspondent

got nearer the front than Jammu city, so far as I know. After the Indian counter-attack in the Punjab, the civil government in Pakistan became almost as unhelpful as the Indian Government, but the Pakistan Army continued to be cooperative. Correspondents often were able to get to the front by their own means (something they were unable to do in India, partly because of the unauthorized opposition of the local police and officials) and once they had got in touch with the Pak Army they were welcomed and got their stories. As a result of this contrast in the availability of lively news, the war from the Pakistan side got better play in the newspapers and on television (in Britain, particularly, I am told). Not only did the news from Pakistan get more space, it got more headlines and better placement. 'No editor,' said many correspondents, 'is going to give equal attention to an action story from Pakistan and the words of an official spokesman in Delhi.'

Censorship was also a point of contention between foreign correspondents and the Indian Government, although relatively less annoying. (Indian newsmen were not, so far as I know, subject to censorship during the war, but a certain constraint on their editors did and does exist in the form of the Government's powers under the Defence of India Rules.) Officially there was no censorship of outgoing press cables, and correspondents were on several occasions told that there was no censorship. Yet cables were taken from the telegraph office for examination and there were delays of several hours to two days before transmission. In the process copy was not only mutilated but sent in the wrong order and sometimes lost. One resident correspondent took a story to the censor's office directly. He returned several hours later to get it and found that the military officer who was supposed to pass it had left town. Much of the time censoring was done by civilians who had no idea of what should be deleted in the name of security, and one story was held up because the words "air base" were in it. The censorship at forward towns like Jammu and Amritsar was also slow and sometimes had to be repeated in Delhi. Television film censorship in itself by the army was more efficient, according to several cameramen, but the film had to be sent to Bombay for developing and then brought back to Delhi for censorship, at the cost of great effort and delay in shipment.

The Government's handling of news during the war has received almost universal criticism from Delhi editors and journalists as well as from foreign correspondents. The briefings were considered inadequate. The briefers often didn't know the terrain in which the action was taking place and so their explanations often didn't make sense. Usually they were civilians with little knowledge of military affairs, and they often could not explain the military significance of events. Maps were rarely used at the briefings and those used were inadequate or bad. The briefers often had little patience for the questions of non-resident correspondents. As one Indian editor delicately put it, "All the men at the briefings didn't have the same background or the same nationalistic attitude toward the war." The news given out at the briefings varied from 24 to 72 hours late. One briefing officer, asked about this after the war, explained that the briefing officers

hadn't withheld the news, but that it had 'trickled back' slowly from the front. Surely this was not so. The army commander in Delhi must have had fresh news and the delay in giving out the news must have been between army headquarters and the press liason staff, both in Delhi. The handouts and communiques described engagements "in superlative terms", in the words of one journalist. And they contained the barest details of the actual action, rarely giving its significance--a lack that could have been supplemented in the briefings but wasn't. Often villages, rivers, or bridges were referred to without telling where they were. Figures for Pakistan losses in men and materiel were usually given without corresponding figures for the Indians, creating the suspicion among many journalists that the Indians were covering something up.

For their part, Government of India officials present a variety of reasons for their performance. Some of them were generally conceded to be reasonable by the journalistic community. It was a short war and it would have been difficult to get the wrinkles out of any organization in the space of three weeks. The fighting front was also not long and there were a large number of newsmen to fit into it. The army was handicapped by a lack of spare transport and personnel to put at the disposal of newsmen. Large press parties are satisfactory to neither the sponsor nor to the newsmen, and it was difficult in a short time to get a large number of small groups to the front. Also, not everything went badly. Cable transmission was reasonably quick and efficient, except for the delays caused by censorship, and relatively few messages were delayed. As time went on the whole information organization began to function more smoothly. Lower echelon officials who dealt with news handling were frequently inexperienced and inept, but they have pointed out that they were handicapped by the shortcomings of persons higher up the ladder. And for this there is an embarrassing amount of evidence.

At the heart of the matter is the Government of India's complete lack of a coherent information policy. Added to this is a basic mistrust of journalists, especially foreign correspondents, and a secrecy complex. (Again, I base this on information from newsmen and to a lesser degree on my personal experience here.) The original premise of Government officials (there are exceptions) is that the minimum of information or news should be given out, and the fact is that it often takes pressure from the enquirer to elicit this much. The idea that the maximum amount of news should be given and that news should be withheld only if it might genuinely endanger national security, seems to be an idea too horrible to be contemplated. And as many officials dealing directly with the dispensing of news have this attitude, they do not bring pressure on their superiors to lessen their caution and to sanction the release of more information. Officials lower down don't have the professionalism to make their advice listened to at the top.

To make matters worse, there was during the war a bitter intramural conflict between the central office of the Press Information Bureau and its semi-autonomous wing in the Defence Ministry headed by

the Armed Forces Information Officer. Many of the praiseworthy efforts to get newsmen to the front and to get more news made public were stymied by the PIB central office, according to the AFIO and many well-informed journalists. This 'little war' was talked of by everyone including the visiting correspondents and added to the confusion about where to get the news, who was helpful and reliable, and so on, thus greatly lowering the prestige of the information services and of the Government as a whole. One of the major complaints of newsmen here has been that the Government should have learned its lesson from the bad performance of the information people during the 1962 Chinese attack and that it should have made the necessary improvements in case similar situations should arise in the future. An 'office of war information' was set up for this purpose, according to one official, but, he charged, it never functioned because it was "neutralized" by the central office of the PIB. Since the end of the war, as far as one can tell, there have been few attempts to improve matters. Senior officials in the Press Information Bureau and the Ministry of Information, of which the PIB is a part, have instead been busy defending their performance during the war.

But business as usual isn't the answer. The Government and many individual Indians are very unhappy because of the criticism in the foreign press, perhaps justly so. The obvious corollary, it seems to me, is to do everything possible to get better publicity. Yet the Government seems unwilling to translate its unhappiness into an attempt to improve its information organizations and its relations with newsmen. It much prefers apparently to sit back and declare that newsmen are dangerous, that all foreign correspondents and most of their editors are nasty men prejudiced against India, and that nothing can be done. This attitude has gained them nothing abroad and disrespect from their own journalists at home. Moreover, as a big power India must learn to live with an occasionally bad press. As a former press attache with the U.S. Information Service, I can say this with some understanding. To cry foul at every criticism or piece of bad reporting is both self-indulgent and useless. A government's relations with its own national news media and foreign news media is a measure of its maturity, I think. And the Indian Government, despite having a few just complaints, has some growing up to do.

Yours sincerely,



Granville S. Austin

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