
ROLE OF MEDIA IN WAR AND PEACE: CASE FOR BETTER MILITARY - MEDIA EQUATIONS & FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract: The recent ongoing debate about media and military relations in the past few months has inspired a need to delve upon this topic and explore as to where lies the remedy. Media as the fourth pillar of democracy has a role in defending the territorial integrity of the country and other than war or war like situations and used also in addressing some emergent and challenging issues in peacetime in a time bound manner. The military laments that the media many a times does not appreciate the sacrosanctity of the security of information and many a times does not realise the importance of safety precautions that are required to be observed to ensure protection against inadvertent slippage of critical operational information into undesirable hands. There is indubitably a definite requirement to appreciate each other's concerns and constraints. There is a possibility to achieve this by educating both the agencies appropriately about each other's functioning and constraints.

Media can also be used for achieving strategic as well tactical objectives, by means of psychological warfare against the proclaimed adversary. During British raj, the Media or the Public Relations Department of the armed forces was placed directly under the command and control of the Commander-in-Chief. Post-independence, this agency came to be placed under supervision of the civilian officers in the form of Department of Public Relations (D. P. R.) under the Ministry of Defence in Government of India.

Due to emergence of new-media i.e. Smartphone and Tablets, a military commander may not even come to know if a smart reporter has already communicated the news story to his Editor through his smartphone even before the story could be vetted by the military which may be at the cost of sensitive information going in public domain.

Considering this, the paper suggests having accredited journalists in the operational units of armed forces, the concept known as 'Embedded Journalism' wherein certain numbers of accredited journalists are inducted into the military echelons in peacetime and are imparted training on ground rules of conduct and with respect to the task, ethos, culture & traditions of the concerned unit/echelon. These vetted journalists would then move along with the units to the exercise locations and get practically trained on the scene of action in the art of covering the operations from the forefront during war.

The author also recommends the induction of a qualified and dedicated tri-service Media Corps in the services comprising the officers formally recruited from all the three services and pooled together to perform the gigantic role of Defence Journalists performing the function of Public Relations for the armed forces. Alternatively, the direct selection of fresh Graduates and Post Graduates in Journalism / Mass Communications and Media Management through a separate competitive exam conducted by the Union Public Service Commission can also be considered.

The author also suggests the induction of military journalists in Ministry of External Affairs (M.E.A.) and foreign missions in important countries would indirectly facilitate defence acquisitions also as military related inputs may also help in highlighting the prospects of future military acquisitions in relation to the potential seller and buyer countries of military hardware. The military journalists working in M.E.A. can also aid in the informal projection of buyer's perspective and the generic capabilities that the nation is likely to seek in a weapon system proposed to be procured in future of-course observing the due protocols of Official Secrets Act, 1923 and various orders issued on the subject from time to time.

Through this paper the author expresses his confidence that the role of media in military journalism, if managed carefully and professionally, can yield extremely effective and long-lasting results, and also that the effectiveness of media management taking into account the steps suggested by the paper will manifest itself into furthering long term strategic national interests depending upon the capability of military and diplomacy both-with respect to utilising the system to the national advantages and also for achieving broad strategic aims in wider framework of the nation's Foreign Policy. The author concludes by saying that there is a definite need

for a better coordination between the two institutions of a powerful democracy which can be surgically achieved.

Keywords: New-Media, Embedded Journalism, Media Corps, Military Acquisitions.

Introduction: *Inspiration and Background:* The recent ongoing debate about media and military relations in the past few months has inspired a need to delve upon this topic and explore as to where lies the remedy. Media is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. While on one hand the military has a role in defending the territorial integrity of the country on the other it also comes in aid to civil authority most of the times. The account of various events in our country tells us about the enhanced role which the military has played actively in containing situations ranging from law & order breakdowns to handling natural calamities, tackle insurgency and anti-terrorist campaigns. Other than war or war like situations, the military many a times is used in addressing some challenging issues in peacetime. The example of a collapsed foot over bridge being resurrected by the army within shortest time just hours before the scheduled inauguration of the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi in September 2010 is worth citing here. *“The organisers have at last been given some good news after soldiers built a replacement Second World War-style Bailey bridge in just six days. The army cleared the remains of the old bridge before starting construction on the new one on September 25, building it out of prefabricated sections” [1].*

It is important to reiterate here that the Indian armed forces enjoy the reputation of quick fixing the enormously challenging tasks in the most professional, methodical and time bound manner, as the Indian armed forces are accredited with a rare distinction of accomplishing any and every task thoroughly professionally. It would not be out of context to say here that media has a proactive role to play in sensitising the environment about the manner in which these gargantuan tasks are being accomplished by the Indian armed forces. It is because the media has a far and deep reach into the psyche of a nation. The media therefore has a significant role to play in projecting the image of the armed forces and igniting the flame of patriotism in the hearts of countrymen.

Conflicting Contentions: Considering above, the relations between the two great institutions ought to be amicable and harmonized beyond any measure. However, the military side of the story is that the media does not seem to appreciate the seriousness of the role that the military plays or the circumstances under which the military operates. The military also laments the fact that media in its sheer journalistic vehemence attempts to gather and report any and every kind of information regardless of the security concerns associated thereto. The main gripe of military is that the media perhaps does not appreciate the seriousness of observing the safety precautions that are normally required to be observed to ensure protection against inadvertent slippage of critical operational information into undesirable hands. The military point is perfectly logical and well taken because the most potent weapon that a military field commander holds against his adversary is-the element of surprise. It is relevant to cite the example of terrorist attack on Hotel Taj in 2008 in Mumbai. The real-time coverage of NSG operations was in a way providing a live picture of the commando operations to the perpetrators of the attack sitting in the Operations Rooms of the adversary and creating difficulties for the security forces in action on the scene of operations at Mumbai. The situation became further tricky when certain journalists started discussing the operations on electronic media channels. The public started making calls to Police Control Room to stop the live telecast. Then the National Security Guard (N.S.G.) directed media for stopping the live telecast forthwith which was instantly complied with [2].

However, on the other hand, the Media looks for complete freedom in gathering the news while at the same time being generally apprehensive that the military may suppress the truth most of the times. Media feels that in the fog of war or armed conflicts, particularly Low Intensity Conflict Operations (L.I.C.O.) in which the military is seen increasingly involved today, the military may try to suppress the truth and conceal the vital facts in the garb of security of information.

This leads us to a belief that it is a clash of mutual interests and understanding that culminates into such trust deficit. However, the saving grace is that there are wise heads on both the sides who understand the need of mutual appreciation of each other's concerns and that is how the equilibrium is sustained in the whole gamut of military-media relations. There is indubitably a definite requirement to appreciate each other's concerns and constraints, so that the steadiness in the relations between these two powerful pillars of the democracy can be sustained.

Constructive Role that Media Can Play towards Image-Building for Military: There is no denying the fact that there is a general lack of exposure on both the sides about each other's functioning. It cannot be contested that media is expected to play a more effective and meaningful role in building the image of the military. Educating both the agencies appropriately about each other's functioning and constraints would definitely help in establishing a strong bond between the two by ensuring dissemination of factually correct information about military functioning besides kindling the fire of patriotism among the countrymen and projecting a positive image of the military.

In the modern era, the live telecast of Gulf war and Operation Desert Storm across the globe on an unparalleled scale brought to fore the active contribution that the media can potentially make towards dissemination of war related news and events for public consumption. Media's active role during Kargil war in 1999 positively helped in sustaining the morale of the forces at highest ebb by keeping their near and dear ones abreast with the latest goings-on in the battlefield. This apart, ensuring citizens' undying love for the nation, respect for people in uniform, for their zest to do anything for the country and fighting intrepidly even at the peril of one's own life to safeguard the national freedom can be inculcated through a successful media crusade.

Media also has a capability to draw prompt attention of the government as well as public to the burning issues that have bearing on the armed forces. For example, the recent dissemination of news about incongruities in pay & allowances between the armed forces and their civilian counterparts had been successful in making people cognizant of the ground realities which the public is generally oblivious about. Similarly, the role of media in driving home issues related to One Rank One Pension (O.R.O.P.) or induction of lady officers into the armed forces were effective in enlightening the public about the magnitude thereof.

There is no denying the fact that the media reporting of military operations in aid to civil authorities goes a long way in convincing the public about the reasonableness of the degree of force that the military may at times have to apply in order to handle critical situations like riots, general unrest and other violent activities (for example the recent Jat agitation in Haryana).

Shri Manohar Parrikar, the former Indian Defence Minister once stated [3], that the army can't be trained to use Lathis, when called in aid to civil authorities to tackle erupting violent situations, at times the military may be constrained to use the amount of force which may actually appear excessive and taken in negative light by the public. In such situations, the public mistrust may assume violent proportions as happened in J&K last year when a mob surrounded a security forces platoon and attempted to harm the entire contingent [4]. The incidents of violent mob pelting stones on security forces in J&K are worth mentioning here. This apart, a revolutionary named Irom Sharmila Chan of Manipur who recently ended her 16 years' long fast protesting against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (A.F.S.P.A.) stated that she would fight against A.F.S.P.A. through electoral politics [5].

More often than not, the actions taken by the armed forces while conducting operations against Ultras in trouble torn states of North East and anti-terrorist operations in J&K get confronted by public ire. Same story holds good also for anti-naxal operations in the states of Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh where many a times we come across incidents of public clashes with the armed forces in protest against the rightful force applied by the armed forces in order to handle violent contingencies. The use of force by army has not been accepted by the public and led to a demand for withdrawal of the A.F.S.P.A. from North Eastern India. Incidentally, the demand for withdrawal of A.F.S.P.A. also stands supported by a judicial decision by the Meghalaya High Court which asked the Centre to consider enforcing the A.F.S.P.A. (1958) in Garo Hills region of the state which was in the grip of a serious law and order problem with a spurt in abduction and killing by militants. The order comes amid an intense campaign by human rights groups for repeal of A.F.S.P.A. in the Northeast [6].

It is here that, the proactive role played by media pitches-in, through apprising the public of the ground realities. In face of these controversies, a positive media support would go a long way in preventing rumour mongers from turning the public against the armed forces or the actions taken by the armed forces in course of diffusing a potentially exploding situation.

Can Media Be Used As A Force Enhancer?: Media can also be progressively used for achieving strategic as well tactical objectives, by means of psychological warfare against the adversary. The commonest example here is through wide media publicity about routine military activities e.g. on-going routine military exercises or Joint International military exercises in synchronization with the armed forces of friendly countries. A balanced coverage of only the broad events while at the same time safeguarding the vital operational information and capabilities and hinting at possible military tie ups with powerful international players backed by the home government's strong resolve to effectively tackle the most painful global issues e.g. international terrorism, would be effective in instantly chilling the spine of the known adversary. This may in a way also help in creating a situation of deception for the adversary who might then be forced to believe what is being publicised by media. With effective use of media, the adversary would be left with no choice but to focus on convincing its own citizens regarding the veracity of the facts being projected by the Indian media rather than concentrating on its military preparedness.

Media Function in Indian Military in the Present Scenario: Historically during British raj, the Media or the Public Relations Department of the armed forces was placed directly under the command and control of the Commander-in-Chief. Post-independence, this agency came to be named as Department of Public Relations (D.P.R.) and placed in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in Government of India under an Additional Director General (Media and Communications).

Some of the important functions performed by the D.P.R. under MoD are as under: -

- Provide specially issued comments of military on important matters to media,
- Function as Enquiry service for the armed forces,
- Release news and stories related to military activities,
- Facilitate media interviews of senior commanders on special occasions,
- Organise media briefings, press conferences by senior commanders to facilitate better understanding of armed forces activities from time to time,
- Oversee and facilitate the online visibility of the armed forces.

Each of the three-armed forces have certain number of officers holding the rank of Lt Col or equivalent who are designated as Defence Public Relations Officers (D.P.R.O's). This apart each of the services also has D.P.R.O's positioned at the various Command Headquarters. Though practically in course of their duty, these D.P.R.O's report to the Commanders-in-Chief of various Command headquarters to which they have been assigned, administratively and functionally they actually report to the MoD. Post induction, these D.P.R.O's are imparted a short capsule course on various aspects related to management of media in the armed forces at Indian Institute of Mass Communication (I.I.M.C.) New Delhi. However, the actual learning is largely on-the-job.

The latest strides made in the sphere of Information and communication Technologies (I.C.T.) during recent decades have comprehensively impacted the complete gamut of media and journalism in military sphere too. By virtue of the most sophisticated media gadgets, today a media reporter is in a position to file an e-copy of news directly from the theatre of military operations within few minutes of gathering the news i.e. real-time reporting from the scene of action through improved satellite technology. The media activity in respect of the armed forces is not immune from all this.

What Is The Role Of Security At Source Or Embedded Journalism?: Security at Source or Embedded journalism is an important concept in the discipline of Journalism under which, the copy of the news report is first vetted by the military field commander before it is filed by the reporter. However as stated above, in the era of new media i.e. Smartphone and Tablets, this practice appears slightly outdated. This may even be detrimental and at the cost of sensitive information going in public domain.

The disastrous consequences of such an eventuality drive home a case in favour of having a group of accredited journalists in the operational units of armed forces, conceptually known as 'Embedded Journalism' wherein certain numbers of accredited journalists are inducted into the military echelons and are imparted training on ground rules of conduct and with respect to the task, ethos, culture & traditions of the concerned unit/echelon in peacetime. These vetted journalists are then expected to move along with the units to the operational locations and get practically trained on the scene of action in the discipline of covering the operations live from the forefront. Since these journalists are already trained during peacetime on rules of conduct and

desired degree of confidentiality of the details regarding operations, it is expected that they become efficient to cover the operations during war within the precincts of desired confidentiality.

However, this system has come under criticism from certain journalistic quarters on the ground that the accredited journalists eventually tend to get influenced by the unit culture to which they may be assigned and consequently their independence may be compromised once they start towing the line that the unit culture impresses upon them. However, all the minute operational details cannot be disclosed in the interest of tactical advantage that the operational unit may strive for, in the interest of an efficient result oriented performance. Another factor that seems to restrict adoption of this concept is that practically only a limited number of embedded journalists can be trained and inducted into military units during operations.

A Word About Feasibility and advantages of Dedicated Media Corps in the Military: As stated earlier, presently officers of the rank of Colonel/Lieutenant Colonel and equivalents are shortlisted by each service and detailed to function as D.P.R.Os at MoD and positioned at various command Headquarters.

To achieve standardisation of media practice in armed forces, the idea to have a qualified and dedicated tri-service Media Corps in the military is worth considering. In other words, a dedicated Media Corps comprising the officers from all the three services can be recruited separately and pooled together to perform the gigantic task of Public Relations for the armed forces. To amplify the point, a boost can be given to the system through separate recruitment drive to be undertaken in following manner:

- To select the in-service officers having befitting aptitude and attitude for media and PR functions who would be deployed on PR duties on permanent basis as a specialised intra / inter-services cadre in line with the existing specialised services cadre of Law qualified officers in the Judge Advocate General (J.A.G.) Branch in each of the three services.
- Alternatively, to select fresh Graduates and Post Graduates in Journalism / Mass Communications / Media Management through a competitive exam conducted through Union Public Service Commission.

There is no misgiving about the fact that the accredited military journalists may also be utilised to play an important role in conduct of foreign policy as instrument of the Public diplomacy that reflects the moods, attitudes and opinions of public and profoundly influences the formulation of diplomatic policy and conduct of foreign relations by the national government. The Public Diplomacy has today assumed an unprecedented credence in the formulation of foreign policy and management of international relations in almost every type of nation of the world especially those espousing the democratic values. Recent decision of United Kingdom to dissociate itself from the European Union based on the public opinion of British citizens is an example in this connection. Likewise, the military journalists can provide military related inputs which in larger perspective can possibly influence the shaping of nation's foreign policy by government.

This apart, it is opined that the proposed induction of military journalists in Ministry of External Affairs (M.E.A.) and foreign missions in important countries may also indirectly facilitate defence acquisitions. It would be useful also because these trained military journalists would be extremely useful in providing valuable military related inputs required in the formulation of foreign policy, as well as help in highlighting the prospects of future military acquisitions in relation to the potential seller and buyer countries of military hardware. An active involvement of military journalists in foreign policy might help in smooth finalisation of Government to Government (G-to-G) defence procurements which have the biggest merit of cutting through the system inherent bureaucratic delays and at the sametime making the weapon suppliers responsible for fair conduct operating under the umbrella of their respective governments. In addition, this may also ensure accrual of benefits of better collective bargaining and greater accountability of the foreign suppliers of military hardware.

It is also felt that in this regard, the role also of military journalists working in M E A can aid in the informal projection of buyer's perspective and the generic capabilities that a nation is likely to seek in a weapon system to be procured in future. This proactive approach on part of military media corps would greatly help in a more meaningful choice of a weapon platform and a better bargain in military acquisitions while at the sametime informally helping the potential military hardware exporters to improve their product as per the potential buyer's visualised equipment performance expectations and capabilities. However, this needs to be ventured into considering due protocols of Official Secrets Act, 1923 and various orders issued on the subject from time to time.

Conclusion: Role of media in military journalism, if managed carefully and professionally, can definitely yield extremely effective and long-lasting results, comparably much better than what can normally be visualised. The effectiveness of media management taking into account the steps suggested above, is certain to manifest itself into furthering long term strategic national interests depending upon the capability of military and diplomacy both-with respect to utilising the system to the biggest national advantages and also for achieving broad strategic aims within the wider framework of the nation's Foreign Policy. There is therefore a definite need for a better synergy between the two institutions of a powerful democracy which is possible to be achieved intelligently and surgically.

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