Media Coverage on Ethnic Conflict in North-East India: An Analysis on the Issues and Challenges in Conflict Communication

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Abstract

This focus of this paper is to assess how media representational practices shape and affect current debates on identity and ethnic conflicts. North-East India exhibits divergent social and cultural distinctiveness characterized by socio-political instability and unrest. These conflicts in the region are reflected in the patterns of conflict which are varied in their nature with each ethnic group having a distinct set of location specific concerns and grievances. While it is believed that the mass media can mould peoples’ opinion and belief, it seems necessary to examine how it could communicate ethnic conflict with greater sensitivity and conscientiousness. It is argued that if the media could support forces that lead to conflict, it could also contribute towards mitigating conflict and foster peace in the region. This study critiques on the ethical issues relating to the fundamental techniques of ‘conflict reporting’ vis-a-vis professional responsibilities which are grounded in economics and the politics of sensationalism on which the media industry thrives. Furthermore, this paper discusses media coverage of ethnic conflict in North-East and the increasing debate on the role played by the media during conflict and post-conflict situation. Finally, it shows how individual journalists and the media could collectively address the complexities in conflict communication.

Keywords: Identity, media, conflict communication, ethnic conflict, peace
1. Introduction
The discourse on ethnic identity and conflict has received much attention in academics and policy debates. Given the fact that it has been scarcely explored in terms of how we construct opinions on what is reported in the media, it seems necessary to study ethnicity from multiple fields of inquiry. Contrary to the apprehension that the media industry in our country thrives on the politics of sensationalism, it is believed that the media could actually communicate ethnic conflict with greater sensitivity and conscientiousness. It is argued that if the media could support forces that lead to conflict, it seems logical to investigate how it could contribute towards mitigating ethnic conflict. This study is an assessment on the role of media during conflict and post conflict situation.

While the North-East represents heterogeneity at its extreme with high level of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversities, the ethnic conflicts in the region are a reflection of innumerable reasons. This is reflected in the patterns of conflicts which are varied in their nature and it remains divergent and ever-changing. These range from secession to autonomy, movement against illegal immigrants, ethnic conflicts and the perceived sense of isolation from mainstream India which has resulted in violence and mass mobilization.

The region exhibits multiplicity of socio-political instability and economic backwardness which is believed to have retarded the process of development in north-east. The reactive nature of our policies has encouraged the belief that violence alone would attract the Center’s attention. Besides, lack of consistency and firmness in dealing with the issues which concerns the people of the region has added another dimension as it poses economic, social and cultural threats and has provided cause for conflict and violence.

2. Media Coverage on Ethnic Conflict
Malcolm X says “The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent feel guilty and the guilty innocent and that’s the power. Because they control the minds of the masses” Media has a major role to play in containing the spread of conflict by disseminating knowledge to the public with the widest coverage. While it is believed that the media can move issues to the center stage or keep them out of public view, it seems logical to examine how it could be an instrument which could foster change.

Communicating conflict through the media has been divisive because of the diverse stakeholders associated with it viz, affected individuals, social activists and journalists. It becomes even more perplexing because each of them have their own unique ways of looking at it. It is gauged that media whether print or audio-visual can help mitigate conflict. Yet, in the response to mitigating conflict it has remained under-reported or if covered at all, it is not presented with the full spectrum of facts, thus misleading those it is supposed to inform or educate.
The ‘Magic Bullet Theory’ during the early 1960’s posits that the messages the mass media disseminate would always be followed by the adoption of the communicated ideas. However, there seems to be a departure from such a notion as it is now speculated that the media do not have complete control over the social change process or the way how we perceive certain things in its entirety. Contrary to this DeFluer and Ball-Rokeach (1988) and others believe that the mass media still play a major role in the social learning process and have enormous influence on how individuals acquire new ideas and orient themselves in the society.

3. Issues and Challenges in Conflict Communication

Media coverage of conflict has been mystified in a manner which is supposedly baffling because the quantum of media coverage on conflict is not sufficient to keep the people meaningfully informed. The media professionals need to realize the complexity and inter-connectedness of the web of issues into which it is woven, especially if they want to engage in a meaningful communication with the masses. A purposeful and impact bearing information dissemination can emerge only after an assessment on the political and historical contours and by examining the gaps in the dissemination of information on the issue.

The biggest challenge for the media is to ensure balanced reporting with a view to preventing escalation of conflict. It remains to be seen how it could be maintained, given the fact that conflict sells better than co-operation. Tensions frequently escalate in situations where information is scarce. Therefore, providing a variety of information that contains a range of facts, perspectives and opinions would be a de-escalating measure. The way in which journalists report on conflict can drastically affect the audiences’ perception of the situation and thus may aggravate the situation. Furthermore, it becomes all the more difficult in upholding one’s journalistic objectivity and reporting events with an attitude towards conciliation.

4. Conclusion

Conflicts and perceived sense of neglect and deprivation has a mutual relationship which in turn could become a breeding ground for conflict. Its consequences constrain development and well-being of the people which finally becomes a reason for social unrest. Media has an important role to play in disseminating knowledge to promote better awareness on conflict and foster better understanding on such issues. Moreover, it should encompass the factors responsible for escalation of conflicts. Media that are sensitive towards promoting tolerant and diverse viewpoints can be both informative which in turn could mitigate conflict to some extent. The ability to impart and share information globally and locally via multiple communication channels has expanded media’s role in precipitating, ameliorating and communicating ethnic conflict in a more meaningful way.
References


