

From the Belly of the Beast: Reflections on Global Media and Racism

By Kunda Dixit

There is a tendency to blame the messenger. There is a lot wrong with media, but we must remember that it just mirrors the state of society. If you think that the media is part of the problem, then it is important to understand what the media is, what drives it, who owns it, what makes it tick. It is essential to study the economic underpinnings of media in the age of globalisation, how new information technologies are affecting content, and how there is cause for optimism because alternative media and forms of resistance are also spreading.

One should have no illusions about it: another declaration at the end of yet another UN conference is not going to make much of an impact on the way media functions, it is not going to transform the nature, content or ownership of media. One needs to be realistic about what one is trying to change, and see whether the institutions one wants to change, want to change in the first place.

Globalisation is nothing new. It is just another name for good, old-fashioned colonialism. Resistance to globalisation is also not new, China has been resisting globalisation since the Opium War, in which Britain arm-twisted the Middle Kingdom for the right to sell Indian opium in the mainland. How is this any differ-

...fewer and fewer people today control the information we get, and they are setting the agenda for the rest of the world: how we should behave, what we should buy, which movies we should watch, what we should think.

ent from U.S. pressure on Beijing on WTO? The British saw India as a source of raw materials for the empire, and a market for cotton. Today, India is a source of cheap labour in the sweatshops of the information technology industry, and a huge market for consumer goods.

Globalisation is just imperialism in disguise, it has the same motive: control over resources and the right of might. The only thing different about this worldwide integration of free markets, trade and financial flows is that it has coincided with dramatic advances in transportation and information technologies in the past 12 years. In fact, it is when you mix the international free market with media that you get the Great Globaliser: the vanguard of consumerist-oriented media content that drives the globalisation juggernaut. Like in every other business, every other day one hears of mega-mergers of media and information systems. The

When your main guiding principle is to give the public what you think the public wants in the cheapest possible way, then you are bound to have problems. You will go for the black and white, good and bad: you will miss the nuances, the gray areas. News is whatever is out of the ordinary, whatever is unusual, news is negative. Persistent coverage of only the negative may be absolutely factual, but it distorts the truth.

world's top five communications conglomerates control nearly half of the international media business. Bigger and bigger multimedia corporations are being formed by the mergers of television, telecommunications and computer companies. The pattern is for a powerful non-media business to own an entertainment supplier, a news network, one cartoon channel, a Hollywood movie archive, one sports channel and then use the delivery of cable, satellite, internet and telecommunications to bring the content into every living room possible.

So, fewer and fewer people today control the information we get, and they are setting the agenda for the rest of the world: how we should behave, what we should buy, which movies we should watch, what we should think. So, the

message we get is: that Iran is bad, Saudi Arabia is good, it is OK to spy on a country you are not at war with but it is not OK that the country you are spying on doesn't want you to spy on them.

The message is: free trade is great, the poor are poor because they are lazy, and it is OK for 20 percent of the world's population to consume 85 percent of its resources. Reportage of this kind perpetuates racial stereotypes, breeds intolerance and xenophobia. The Internet doesn't change this: the corporate values that drove the Industrial Revolution also drive the Information Revolution.

As we have seen with planet-wide environmental problems, the globalisation of the economy also has a global impact on natural systems. The roots of the global environmental crisis lie in prosperity (which is over-consumption, wastage, inefficient energy use) and poverty (poor people forced to destroy their environment to survive from day to day).

Media as tool of globalisation

Because media itself is a tool of economic globalisation, we see very little of these issues covered. For the multimedia supranationals this is just another business. Entertainment, news and current affairs are products that have to be manufactured as cheaply as possible, and distributed as widely as possible for maximised profits. Responsibility and accountability towards society, respect for diversity, tolerance, global interdependence, underdevelopment are not really important. It is much more profitable to repeat the same four or five items of news on the hour every hour 24 hours a day than to provide in-depth, investigative reports on vital issues. In this business, the bottom line is industrial entertainment and mass-pro-

duced canned news. That is why it is getting increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a soap-opera and a news item.

When your main guiding principle is to give the public what you think the public wants in the cheapest possible way, then you are bound to have problems. You will go for the black and white, good and bad: you will miss the nuances, the gray areas. News is whatever is out of the ordinary, whatever is unusual, news is negative. Persistent coverage of only the negative may be absolutely factual, but it distorts the truth. The end result is there for us all to see in media today: jingoism, misplaced nationalism, demonisation, scapegoating, ethnic stereotyping. The emphasis is on exclusion: widening the gap between Us and Them. Many of you who watch cable news channels in South Asia today will know what I mean.

Censorship by exclusion

It's an irony, isn't it, that our "free" press is not free at all! Media practices "censorship by exclusion." In a sense this is even more dangerous than overt censorship in a totalitarian state because a free press in the globalised marketplace just leaves out news that is too complicated, too obscure or too unpalatable for minds with short attention spans, where the latest episode of Baywatch is just the flick of a remote away. And it includes a flood of factoids that distort the truth.

So what can we do? One thing is certain, it is very unlikely that the change will come from top. The owners of media empires don't care what is broadcast as long as it sells. The change has to come from below: from reporters, journalists, correspondents and editors, with better

training, better motivation, and a better grasp of issues. Civil society and activists should work closely with reporters to be their news source, brief them on the complexities, show them a way out so that reportage offers also hope, not just criticism.

In Nepal, the media work closely with the NGO movement, who alert them on stories like the one of a Nepali man unjustly jailed in Japan for a crime he did not commit and who would probably be free if instead of being a Nepali he was an American or European. They tell the media about the injustices faced by people from the lower castes in Nepal who have dared to rise up and demand their rights, or of former bonded laborers who have found that freedom is a dead end street. It can be done, all it needs are journalists who have a soul and a conscience. A Hungarian proverb comes to mind: "If you are among thieves and you are silent, then you are a thief too."

Kunda Dixit is a Nepali journalist with wide experience reporting from around the world on a range of issues including conflict, environment and development issues. He started out as a news reporter for the BBC in New York, then became the Asia-Pacific Director of the Inter Press Service news agency. He returned to Nepal in 1996 to head the South Asian office of Panos Institute in Kathmandu. He is now the publisher and editor of the Himal Media Group which publishes Nepali Times, a weekly English language paper and Himal, a monthly English magazine for South Asia. This article was adapted from a presentation he made at the media and racism workshop organised by Isis-International-Manila in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific NGO Networking Meeting in preparation for the WCAR held in Kathmandu, Nepal from 27 to 29 April 2001.