CONFLICT, MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA
REPORT FROM A ROUNDTABLE
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Introduction

Securing peace and ending armed conflict and indiscriminate acts of violence against civilians present significant challenges to peace and the protection of human rights in South Asia and around the world. Central to an effective response to this challenge is to understand how public discourse, especially within the media, can be steered towards enabling a more transparent, well-informed policy response with positive human rights outcomes. A discussion that critically reflects on the South Asian scenario is timely and pertinent, given contemporary South Asian realities: the post-conflict situation in Sri Lanka; insurgencies in Jammu and Kashmir and the North East of India; the turmoil in Pakistan over the blasphemy law and other issues; the political tensions in Nepal; and the struggle in Bangladesh to deepen democracy. All of this is happening in a context where the media has become increasingly commercialised and simultaneously subject to state controls of various kinds.

The Kathmandu Roundtable on Conflict, the Media and Human Rights in South Asia (jointly organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Panos South Asia) brought together senior media professionals, social scientists, peace and human rights advocates, and security analysts (see Appendix A) to consider how conflict, peace and human rights questions are discussed in the public domain, especially in the media, in South Asia. The Roundtable was held in Kathmandu on 20 and 21 November 2010.

The Roundtable was intended to strengthen ongoing efforts towards developing a more layered representation of internal conflicts in South Asia, so as to include human rights concerns. The discussions were aimed at developing a better understanding of the nature of the state, media and civil society interactions and dynamics in the region, which have such a significant impact on public discourse and policy. Hence, in addition to analysing and questioning the dominant vocabularies within the media on contemporary conflicts in the region, the Roundtable also intended to enable consideration of working towards a plural media that reflects the diverse positions on these conflicts.

This report presents, succinctly, some of the most important issues and questions discussed at the Roundtable. While it broadly reflects the structure of the agenda, it is not a detailed record of discussions at the Roundtable. On the contrary, it focuses on some of the most important broad themes of the discussion and seeks to present important insights emerging from the discussions relevant to these themes. The report also includes brief contributions from some of the participants on specific issues (see Boxes 2 and 3 and Section 6).

At the outset, it might help to clarify the perspectives that framed the Roundtable discussions in considering the place of the media in the construction of the discourse on conflict in South Asia. The media is not an institution that merely mirrors a given reality ‘out there’; if that were the case then the kind of questions one would ask would be different – for example, objectivity and reliability would be an important focus. Rather, in this Roundtable, the focus was on critically examining how the media imagines specific versions of reality, within given and dynamic relations of power and resistance. Such a perspective underlines the need to understand what are the exclusions, the taken for granted terms of debate, the unspoken and unquestioned premises, the ‘normal’ space from which the media gazes at the world of conflict. This perspective eschews an assessment of how true to reality the media are; rather, it seeks to map the ways in which the media both reproduces and questions the dominant framings of conflict.
1. THE POST-COLONIAL NATION-STATE IN SOUTH ASIA, NATURE OF CONFLICTS AND THE MEDIA

Discussions at the Roundtable suggested at least three ways of viewing the struggle for resources, territory or identity that are at the heart of conflicts in South Asia. Firstly, there are conflicts that arise from challenges posed to the state but within the framework of the existing constitutional and politico-legal structure. Somewhat in contrast are conflicts that arise because of a rejection of the existing constitutional and politico-legal framework. Lastly, there are conflicts arising from challenges to the idea of dominant nationhood underlying concepts of the modern state in South Asia. It is also important to point out though that these fault lines may well intersect as some of them embody multiple claims, are by their very nature embedded in complex historical and contemporary contexts and are constantly evolving.

Discussions at the Roundtable also underlined the importance of locating any analysis of conflicts and the nature of public discourse around them in the context of neo-liberal globalisation and the pervasive transformation experienced by South Asian states, especially since the liberalisation of economies in the 1990s. This has created further schisms within the multi-layered polities of the region, creating new discourses and concentrations of power and exacerbating the exclusion of significant numbers of peoples from access to wealth producing capacities. Thus, despite rapidly increasing inequalities amongst citizens of different countries in South Asia, most governments have actually increased their defence budgets, at the expense of social welfare. Moreover, debates on federalism and devolution of power in erstwhile centralising states like Nepal have not been adequately grounded in realities of resource-sharing and demands for social justice.

An analysis of the nature of media discourse around conflict in South Asia has to be located in the context of deeply stratified societies, the rise of identity politics, the transformations engendered by economic globalisation and the imaginaries of nation-state formation.

The re-emergence of identity politics, especially religious and linguistic, is something that is common to most post-liberalisation South Asian states. Participants at the Roundtable noted that this is reflected in the manner in which governments have wooed majority communities – both religious and linguistic – in an effort to fragment resistance against other inequities and discriminatory policies. Thus, for instance, it was suggested that in the case of Sri Lanka a post-civil war makeover projecting a Sinhala-Buddhist version of history from a mythical past into its contemporary politics complements a significant push towards rapid economic growth spearheaded by privatising wealth-producing capacities, both of which combine to delegitimise any claims to empowerment including autonomy for ethnic minorities. Indeed, many participants opined that this observation could apply to other countries as well.

The resistance to domination and exclusion takes many forms across South Asia. This includes the expansion of human rights advocacy and more dynamic and nuanced understandings of civil society in the region but also the use of violence. The public discourse reflects the realities of deeply stratified societies and the inequalities central to them. This is most evident in the nature of media discourse, where elite consensus and rule of law often collide with countervailing attempts at establishing more populist regimes and structures.

Participants observed that social divisions and expansions and contractions in democratic spaces were often first reflected in the media, which is a key site for the evolution of a public sphere in which partisan political differences are often more pronounced than substantive ones. The participants also noted that like other social and political institutions, the media in South Asia also carries a burden of seminal events, such as the partition of colonial South Asia (including Myanmar). For much of the dominant media, the nationalist grid is most commonly used view of the region’s complex, layered history and this constructs the perspectives that delegitimise the various movements that seek to reorganise territory or renegotiate power relations.

Moreover, the dominant media impoverishes the representation of these realities because it is allied to a problematic series of images that are driven by a “war-on-terror” security discourse, rather than one that highlights the increasing volume of human rights advocacy. Given the larger context of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, traditional print and electronic media in South Asia (with some notable exceptions) have been instrumental in effecting the shift from a discourse based on ideas of rights and citizenship, to one based on choice and consumers.

The role of the media in the construction of ideas of national interest within public discourse emerged as a matter of recurrent critique at the Roundtable. This is an important question because ideas of national interest often serve as a yardstick for evaluating the legitimacy and even legality of competing ideas and positions and by extension of the advocates of these ideas and positions. A number of specific concerns are relevant in this regard.

The inability to separate critiques of the government from criticisms of the state is a major concern. Governments, constituted by a dominant political party or coalition, may well act in ways that promote their own interest. The state, as a repository of the broader set of interests vested in maintaining the current configuration of political authority, tends to frequently use the anti-national tag to deny the legitimacy of all challenges to it. This tag is commonly used across South Asia to characterise struggles of peoples who challenge established ideas of economic development, or raise human rights questions or challenge dominant conceptions of nationhood. This is especially true of questions that involve national security, real or apparent. A research report on the role of the media in national security produced by the South Asian Strategic Stability Institute is instructive in so far as it underlines the media’s role as “force multiplier” arguing that “today decisions are no longer based on events but on how the events are presented.”

To the extent that national security embodies the ‘high politics’ of the contemporary context in South Asia (as elsewhere) it has increasingly become the pre-eminent prism employed by the dominant media in assessing challenges to the legitimacy of the state.

Several participants agreed with the observation that human rights challenges or other interrogations of dominant perceptions of national interest are thus often dealt with across the region by resorting to the 3Ds – disinformation, denial and de-legitimation. Representations of conflicts within the media not only often reflect dominant ethnic, class and caste biases but are also mediated by selective memory and erasures (discussed in detail in Section 2 below). In addition, the nexus between the dominant media and powerful corporate or political interests and the military or intelligence agencies has also reconfigured in alarming ways the basic tenets of newsgathering and journalism (see Box 2).

The importance of media institutions challenging projections of the state’s vision of national interest is highlighted in the context of the Sri Lankan government’s total media blockade of the North and parts of the East during the final phases of the conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The failure of large sections of the media in Sri Lanka to challenge the blockade has now left it with little ability and credibility to actually report on stories in connection with this crucial stage of the conflict that has given rise to some of the most serious human rights concerns in the South Asian context.

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2 Clearly exemplified by the Radia tapes controversy in India, which demonstrated the cosy relationship between big business and their lobbyists, prominent journalists and political figures. For a brief account of the controversy, see for instance www.deccanherald.com/content/116306/radia-tapes-scandal-media.html.
2. QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTATION OF CONFLICTS

Given the crucial place of the media in the construction of the discourse on conflict in South Asia, the Roundtable explored the question of media representation by critically examining how the media imagines specific versions of reality, through its reporting of events and processes, its delineation of the actors involved in these events and its invocation of categories (e.g. national interest, terrorism, secessionism).

The discussions at the Roundtable brought to the fore two primary considerations. Firstly, the importance of foregrounding the unequal nature of the public sphere within which the media is situated. There are exclusions based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, region—a system of structured inequalities that is often taken for granted. The attempt must be to understand how these exclusions operate to create the taken for granted terms of debate, the unspoken and unquestioned premises, the ‘normal’ space from which the media gazes at the world of conflict.

Secondly, that in understanding issues of representation, it is also necessary to historically locate the ways in which the relationship of the media with the state and the market have changed over a period of time (discussed in detail in a later section). There is no doubt that the market plays an important role in shaping the dominant discourse. The increasing corporatisation of the media across South Asia and its close links with industry and industrial barons deserves special mention. In India, this has been coupled with the breaking of journalists’ unions, the mainstreaming of the contract system and the emergence of successful models of ‘paid news’. The increasing presence of the state and its control over the media in zones of conflict is also an overarching reality in South Asia. The emergence of a ‘hard’, security state with political cultures intolerant of dissent has made for a private media where by and large the publishers are a part of a paradigm of dominant rule.

The media is a terrain of struggle where competing realities circulate and interact with other public discourses, a space of unequal flows where a range of stakeholders, from the state to big business to political parties to civil society organisations and movements jostle for voice. In other words, the media provides spaces for alternative versions of reality, while at the same time tending to affirm a dominant sense of the real and a taken-for-granted space of normality. The media is a highly differentiated space encompassing a range of political, social and economic interests, modes of production, dissemination and consumption, locations and languages, genres and narratives.

The ‘reality’ of conflict as represented and constructed by the media and the ways in which this representation of conflict influences and shapes the responses of citizens and groups to ongoing and past conflicts is different across the nations in South Asia. Moreover, it is difficult to make any general statement about how the news and current affairs media in South Asia, whether print, broadcast or online, tend to represent conflict, given the diversity of channels, newspapers, and new media sources.

From discussions at the Roundtable, certain key tendencies in the reportage and media debates on conflict, seem to cut across the region and are flagged in Box 1, below.

The tendencies discussed in Box 1 make for a mainstream media discourse that is impoverished in terms of its critical potential and that constructs the ‘reality’ of conflict with inadequate concern for the human rights of marginalised groups affected by conflict. There are certain popular and dominant imaginaries around which explanations, evaluations and framings of conflict are constructed. These include the nation-state, global terrorism, development, law and order, among others and are frequently invoked by political parties across the spectrum and appear to be questioned only by voices on the margins. Their circulation is not confined to the news media but they emerge and are reproduced by a variety of sources, including popular media. It is important to recognise that representations of conflict even in the popular fictional media, such as Bollywood could be as influential in reproducing or questioning stereotypes of, for instance, terrorists, minorities and ethnic groups, the nation-state and the law and order machinery. These popular images circulate along with images and notions emerging from other sources, such as the rhetoric of political parties, the memories of traumatic events passed orally, the ‘histories’ told in school text-books—all of them forming a system of beliefs, stereotypes, images and often unquestioned ways of seeing through which events will be interpreted, represented and responded to.

Those seeking to provide alternative narratives face a significant challenge in countering many dominant and ubiquitous imaginaries circulating in the public sphere.

It is a major challenge for media and civil society groups that would like to provide alternative narratives, to counter these imaginaries, given their ubiquity and ‘naturalness’ in public discourse. Across South Asia, providing a different perspective, especially one that questions dominant frameworks, runs the risk of being declared seditious, anti-national and subversive. However, with digital technologies and the new media, the emergence of new modes of producing and distributing news allows for possibilities that will be discussed in Section 6 on New Media.
1. There is clearly an episodic treatment of conflict and human rights issues. There is a focus on immediate events and outcomes rather than processes and histories. For instance, participants pointed out in the case of Pakistan, there is often little coverage and even less informed analysis about the conflict in Baluchistan while the same is often the case in India with respect to conflicts in Kashmir or the North East, for example. Media coverage often tends to be devoid of a historical lens and to uncritically invoke dominant, taken for granted imaginaries in framing and narrating events.

2. There is an instrumentalisation of human rights concerns and their subordination to so-called larger concerns such as “national interest”, “law and order” and “state security” or partisan politics." In this, the media tends to reproduce the larger social consensus, which is that there are certain groups, such as terrorists and insurgents, whose human rights do not count and those who defend their rights are seen as ‘sympathisers’ or ‘friends’ of terrorists.

3. There is a fragmenting of issues and a focus on the spectacular. In some sections of the media, particularly the broadcast media, the intense competition and the pressure to constantly produce ‘breaking news’ results in a construction of events as spectacle, lacking in any analysis or background information, failing to grapple with complexity and raising several ethical concerns. This influence of ‘sound bites’ journalism and the constant need for polarisation and political theatre in television journalism to make news and current affairs into ‘drama’ that will grab the eyeballs and enhance TRPs sets the norm for what constitutes ‘news’ as well as shapes viewers’ expectations of the medium and views of world around them.

4. The media shows a tendency to stick to simplistic categorisations based on ‘common sense’ and a black and white interpretation of events, leaving out the shades of grey and the complexities in the processes. This representation of conflict as a struggle between good and evil, where the state and the rule of law and order are unambiguously represented as right is found across South Asia particularly when reporting events from zones of conflict, be it with respect to Kashmir, the North East and the Maoist-dominant tribal areas in India, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka or in Pakistan. The media tend to veer between over-simplifying or over-contextualising (and thus mystifying) any resistance, challenge or contestation.

5. This taking of sides by the media is demonstrated by its often uncritical framing of events by use of terms and labels in ways that are often reductionist or foregrounding reality selectively. Participants cited several examples of such practices including, for example, the widespread use of the term ‘stone pelters’ to characterise youth engaged in the recent outbreak of protests in Kashmir or elsewhere; dubbing certain regions as ‘Maoist-infested’; and the tendency within sections of the Hindi language press in India to use the term sharanarathi (refugees) to refer to Bangladeshi Hindu migrants and ghuspathiye (infiltrators) to refer to Muslim migrants. All these examples point to the need to critically interrogate the terms used for reporting, particularly in conflict situations.

6. There are clear ideological biases based on class and other power relations that determine what constitutes ‘news’ and how the actors in events are represented. For instance, across the board, there is a focus on the opinions of figures of authority and celebrities rather than of common people affected and a tendency to represent those affected as helpless victims.

7. A most disturbing feature which emerged in presentation after presentation was the systematic silences and exclusions that relate to the situations and voices of marginalised groups in militarised zones of conflict. This is coupled with a tendency for selective amnesia relating to past traumatic events such as civil wars, ethnic cleansing, pogroms and riots, where the perpetrators, if they are important political figures, tend to be whitewashed clean by the media. For instance, the ‘Sri Lankan model’ or the ‘Gujarat model’, based on the East Asian model of a dictatorial regime that runs a disciplined, modern, undemocratic capitalist consumer paradise, where ethnicity is marketed as exotica and messy ethnic strife ruthlessly suppressed cleansing, is not questioned enough by the media. The media plays along with the agenda of majoritarian democracy, celebrating the economic miracle that tight control on dissent might make possible. Overall, the media across South Asia exercises a high degree of self censorship (also discussed further in Section 5, on Censorship).

8. There are instances of the media narratives challenging democratic values from time to time. For instance, in the context of Pakistan it was pointed out that the media has often tended to reflect an elite consensus against democracy. While in Sri Lanka, the treatment of rights claims of Tamils are generally couched in a paternalistic discourse – of ‘giving them their rights’ – rather than one of equality.

9. In discussing media representations, linguistic hegemonies, biases and associated class interests play a key role. In India, for instance, the English press tends to reach an elite readership while the vernacular press has a much wider class base. In fact, the observation that the size of the democratic space in India is directly dependent on the size of the democratic space within the vernacular language media found many supporters. In Sri Lanka, there is a clear polarisation, between the Sinhala and Tamil press in their reporting of human rights violations of Tamils, with the former maintaining a silence on the issue. In Nepal, the local language media is weak, while it plays an important role in shaping popular opinion. However one participant noted that a language may sometimes lack in appropriate words; for instance, there are no Nepali words for ‘populism’, ‘demagogue’ or ‘exhumation’.

10. Finally, there is a growing tendency – driven largely by competition and the need to be different – for the major news media moving from a role of reporting events towards becoming interested players: whether it is in terms of events being enacted for media visibility or whether it is in terms of proactive involvement through campaigns, polls, help-lines. While this may seem like a welcome development, especially when it is in favour of a beleaguered civil society, it is often a double edged sword to have the media playing the role of precipitating events. The media as an interested play raises the spectre of altering news itself. It may result in worse, however. In Pakistan, for instance, the televised broadcast of fatwaz calling for death to Ahmedis was followed by the murder of two prominent Ahmedis. The role of the media as interested player raises serious issues of media ethics and accountability, which will be taken up in Section 5. An interesting observation made was that the representation of journalists in popular films has also changed, as in the popular Bollywood film Peepli Live, which satirises the role of journalism in the context of farmer suicides in India.

* For instance in Bangladesh wherein the media is also largely divided along party lines
Box 2. The Changing Nature of Newsgathering

Pamela Philipose

Given the media’s unique and decisive power of interpreting contemporary reality for readers/viewers, it was always argued that the authenticity of their newsgathering and content hinged crucially on their “independence” from non-editorial influences. But the I-word has been rendered increasingly irrelevant over the last few decades, thanks to some significant developments in the media universe that have, in turn, crucially impinged on the nature of newsgathering.

The first can be flagged as partisanship and speaking for power – rather than the old maxim of speaking truth to power. Some attribute this model to media baron Rupert Murdoch, who demonstrated how successful for revenue generation the compact between the elite, the market and the media was. Others point to the Pentagon’s innumerable attempts to shape the media in its image. In 2000, even before 9/11, a handful of military personnel based in the psychological operations unit at Fort Bragg, were working as “regular employees” for CNN, and helped with the production of news. After 9/11, the control regime that had worked towards closing the gap between the media and the military became even more vocal. This convergence of military operations and media coverage, threw up the new model of “embedded journalism” in the Iraq War of 2003. Reporters were allowed to cover the war from the very scene of the fighting subject to two conditions – never to jeopardize troops or the mission. What then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had desired was “total immersion” on the part of the reporters. “Total immersion”, incidentally, is not just what the Pentagon desired, it became the central objective of corporate lobbyists of very stripe. It is a category that has proliferated and grown more sophisticated in recent times, with Niira Radia only the new kid on the block. Lobbyists use information in creative ways to further the interests they represent, either through making it available by well-timed plants and guarantees of “exclusive access”, or by ensuring that it is suppressed or modified. Of course they can do all this only if can influence journalistic newsgathering in profound ways.

Another phenomenon that became more pronounced as the noughties unwound, was the phenomenon of “Breaking News”, which in turn pointed to heightened, even aggravated, competition between large media conglomerates, more so in the age of 24X7 television. Since the need to be the first with news became the central preoccupation, the due diligence that went into the newsgathering of an earlier era – the careful checking and re-checking of facts, the insistence on the counter-view, the prompt issuing of errors and rejoinders, careful follow up, and so on – was observed more in the breach.

As eminent French sociologist, the late Pierre Bourdieu observed in a lecture on television, competition has only homogenized content across the various media. He talks about the phenomenon of circular information and asks, “If you wonder how the people in charge of giving us information get their own information, it appears that, in general, they get it from other informers.”* Newsgathering then gets reduced to following up on particular stories that are already creating a storm on some other channel or newspaper, and doing this by using almost identical sources.

This phenomenon can play itself out in piquant ways. The day after the serial blasts of October 30, 2008, which struck Guwahati, Barpeta, Kokraghar and Bongaigaon, The Economic Times in its news coverage played up the threat to India’s security caused by Islamic militants elements from across the Bangladesh border. It cited an interview given by A.K. Mitra, the earlier chief of the Border Security Force (BSF), on the eve of his retirement, and went on to say: “Throughout last year the BSF had intercepted 807 Bangladeshis trying to illegally cross over to India – the actual infiltration is roughly estimated to be double the number intercepted – the BSF said the figure was almost 10,000 to 12,000 till a few years back. In other words, at least 24,000 Bangladeshis have been infiltrating every year.” Notice how the figure 807 becomes 24,000 in the course of a single sentence with no evidence to back the final figure. Interestingly, the report goes on to cite Mr Mitra’s answer to a question whether investigative agencies feed the BSF with credible information on Bangladeshi infiltration. Mr Mitra is quoted as having said, “We do not get authentic information from investigating agencies on time. Whatever action we have taken so far against militant outfits like HuJi and LeT along the border were based on media reports.” As for the media, it then uses the data the BSF projects, in the next cycle of circular information!

Setting up systems for independent newsgathering from independent and variegated sources is clearly the only way the media can claim credibility for themselves. The question is, are they even inclined to do this?

A key message emerging from interactions at the Roundtable is that the relationship between media and civil society especially human rights advocates in South Asia is a very complicated one. At one level, it seems to be fairly strongly influenced by the relationship between civil society and state—especially in less democratic contexts wherein the state tends to dictate all relationships.

There also arose the question of competencies, both within the media, to comprehend the messages and arguments put forward by human rights advocates, and within civil society, to be able to communicate more effectively. Fundamentally, the dominant media’s appeal to popular opinion and ‘common sense’ politics may put it at odds with the more critical approaches advocated by human rights activists. The stereotyped images and even demonisation of human rights activists or those who challenge the legitimacy of dominant notions of state— as anti-national, traitors, etc, common across South Asia, presents further obstacles.

Human rights advocates need to insist on professional standards rather than seek privileged access while desisting from instrumentalising the media, overlooking incompetency or just rely on ‘cultivating’ journalists.

On the other hand, the tendency of many civil society actors to expect a privileged relationship with the media, especially on grounds that the media has a larger ‘social mission’ was also questioned. Human rights advocates need to review their own approach to the media to insist on professional standards rather than privileged access. Moreover, given that the ‘social mission’ of the media is open to diverse interpretations, being also an argument often harnessed by the state or dominant interests to advance their own views on wider issues of public interest, falling back on good media and journalistic practice appears more effective and strategic. This is also critical in terms of nurturing stronger and more independent media – hence instrumentalising the media and overlooking incompetency or relying on ‘cultivating’ individual journalists may not be an effective strategy in the long-run. At the same time, this is rendered very difficult given the lack of a consistent interest in and transparent engagement with civil society within most media institutions and their vulnerability to larger and more powerful political and business interests. A sustained and broader dialogue and engagement rather than just an issue based approach with media institutions as well as associations of media persons was underlined as important.
4. CENSORSHIP AND CONTROL V. ACCOUNTABILITY

The issue of censorship came up repeatedly across various sessions and country presentations. In each of the countries of the subcontinent, the state exercises different levels of control, both formal and less formal, over various media, ranging from direct pre-censorship (as is the case for cinema in India) to banning and blocking access (as has happened with some internet sites from time to time) to licensing control (e.g. radio) to subtle and indirect ways of control (advertising revenue). In addition to these direct ways of domesticating the media, the state also uses law (e.g. laws regarding sedition or maintenance of public order) and the law and order machinery in order to maintain control. The effects of these acts of censorship are strongly experienced in the silences and erasures within the media when reporting on zones of militarisation and conflict.

Censorship appears to be an ubiquitous and integral feature of the South Asian nation state, appearing in various forms and in varying degrees, depending on the issue and the zone of conflict in question.

In the case of Kashmir, for instance, the state operates using force and fear and the mainstream media colludes with it, using the three D’s mentioned earlier: Disinformation, Denial and Delegitimisation. For instance, violence by the state is reported as rivalry between groups, news of torture and disappearances is blanked out, and the Islamic bogey is used to delegitimise the demands of Kashmiri. In Kashmir, human rights issues emanate from the denial of political rights. The law as it is framed supports the policy of disciplining Kashmiris and the non-negotiability of the relationship of Kashmir with the Indian state. The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, passed in 1990 gives the army immense power and is against any democratic norms; the mainstream media operates within this framework, both accepting the censorship of the state and exercising self censorship in its representation of the Kashmir question.

In Manipur, again the existence of a militarised state and all its attendant human rights abuses leads to a heightened degree of censorship – Manipur has been under the shadow of The Armed Forces Special Powers Act since 1958. The media – state nexus works in various ways: through the proximity of media to security and intelligence agencies and through the media tacitly accepting the agenda set by the state. The media plays an important role in defining ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizenship and selling and marketing a sanitised version of ‘culture’.

Sri Lanka has witnessed the emergence of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse that has dealt with contentious issues of plurality through militarisation and repression of critics and large sections of the Tamil population. The current political culture short-changes any debate on issues of public concern, seeing this as irrelevant at the best and subversive at the worst. As many participants noted, this is reflected in the way the state deals with the media. Repression, disappearances and killings of journalists, denial of access to the militarised zones, surveillance, harassment of media organisations that do not ‘toe the line’ and a media blackout on the conflict and associated human rights violations in the North are disturbing features of the many ways in which the state censorship operates. This has its implications in structuring public discourse in favour of a particular ideology and ruling family. The English and Sinhala media have, by and large, become a party to this paradigm of majoritarianism and the media blackout has not been contested by the media institutions. The media, through acceptance of this state censorship and the exercise of self censorship, tends to uncritically project the image of a strong President who has united the country, defeating the LTTE, and is at the helm of the economic miracle.

State censorship also takes the form of laws that directly control media expression, as in the case of the Indian Cinematograph Act of 1952 which involves pre-censorship of all publicly exhibited films. The definition of ‘public’ in the Act is very loose, making it possible for the state to clamp down on the screening of material that it sees as ‘subversive’. While documentary film makers have for long been opposing this Act, there needs to be more public pressure to change this colonial piece of legislation. Interestingly, the mainstream film industry itself has not come out against censorship and large sections would support the existence of state censorship and regulation of cinema.

Given the existence of retrograde colonial laws, the process of contesting censorship maybe a tedious business and often doomed to failure- and even courts may adopt different standards based on dominant interpretations of ‘national interest’, as demonstrated by Indian Supreme Court cases.

The censorship of the street (enforced by powerful non-state actors) and the censorship of the market (often connected to corporate ownership and control) also shape the nature of media discourse in contemporary South Asia.

The important role that media institutions play in fostering and sustaining a democratic public sphere in the region is often echoed in public discourse and the need for a fourth estate that is independent of state control often emphasized. The issue of corporate ownership and control and the ways in which the market shapes and limits media discourse is often not given as much importance. This censorship of the market is an insidious form of censorship that often passes unnoticed. In the last two decades, liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have had their influence on patterns of media ownership, control and access. Overall, across South Asia, along with a declining the role of the state in national development, there has been a shrinking of space for public community media and a movement away from diversity and multiplicity through (unequal) global flows of information and media content. The shift from the rhetoric of public service to the realpolitik of profits has had significant implications for the representation of conflict and for spaces for dialogue. Today, the market plays an increasingly important role in defining issues of public concern and in determining how the media, including the news media, are packaged for popular consumption; the focus has shifted from looking at viewers as citizens to looking at them as consumers. The very definition of what constitutes ‘news’ has undergone considerable metamorphosis. As already discussed in earlier sections, the intense competition for eyeballs between news channels makes for a focus on ‘breaking news’ that sensationalises events, trivialises issues, is ethically dubious and avoids in-

3 A Draft Cinematograph Bill of 2010 is in the pipeline, which does little to remedy the lacunae in the original Act. For a critique of the proposed bill, see Monteiro and Jayasankar, “A New Pair of Scissors: the Draft Cinematograph Bill 2010”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 45, No. 29, July 17–23, 2010.
depth engagement with serious matters of public concern, including how the state and other actors negotiate zones of conflict within and between countries in South Asia.

Participants noted that across the South Asian region, in addition to the censorship of the state and market, a censorship of the street has also emerged, where non-state actors – often political parties but also other groups – respond with vandalism, intimidation and threats when the media presents issues in a manner that they consider ‘undesirable’ or offensive. The tacit support of this ‘expression of hurt feelings’ often shown by the state by its refusal to take action against those who resort to these tactics leads to an environment where the media organisations and journalists are under constant threat when covering certain issues. This tends to lead to the exercise of self censorship by the media, in order to avoid controversy.

There are also contentious issues when dealing the question of censorship. One needs to make a distinction between freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Given that media is generally believed to have a social function and responsibility how does this impinge on the question of freedom of its expression? Are there any limits and who sets them? How does one for instance look at the issue of hate speech? What would be reasonable restrictions on this? What is the relevance of international human rights standards in this context? How does one work towards public accountability of the media?

The freedom of media and the freedom of expression are distinct and it is important to guard against their conflation and especially the instrumentalisation of either.

While censorship is inimical to protection of human rights, the need for voluntary standards and codes that are monitored by regulatory bodies within the media was highlighted and the experience of the limitations of existing mechanisms such as the Press Council of India, was underlined in the discussions.

While the overall picture regarding the various modes of censorship appears bleak, it is also important to remember that hope exists, often in places outside the mainstream media. For instance, in the case of the very repressive state in Burma, there has been a mammoth and often hidden and silent attempt on the part of individuals and groups to collect and transmit tangible and intangible evidence, which surfaces from time to time. Such attempts contest the language and methodology of forgetting perpetuated by the censorious state and the acquiescent dominant media. The vocabulary of remembering exists in a fourth space, sometimes even outside the alternative media. At certain junctures, it comes into its own and even the mainstream media begins to recognise it.
5. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, STATE AND MEDIA IN SOUTH ASIA

The institutional structure of the media and its dynamics in the region are shaped by four significant dimensions:

i) ownership and control dimensions, whether it is state run or commercial, and the institutional practices that these give rise to;

ii) representational dimensions, which means understanding who has a right to speak; how and when the media employ experts and opinion makers to stand in for citizens;

iii) general social structural dimensions, which alludes to the multiple public spheres that exist in everyday life, within which the media is located; and

iv) regulatory framework dimensions, which relates to the legal and policy frameworks within which the media operates.

Traditionally media in South Asia has been seen as an institution that is either marshalled in to serve the state, and in recent decades the market-state. Added to this, is the fact that globalisation has changed the terrain of traditional media in South Asia. Where the availability of newsprint was once controlled by national governments, there is a greater deregulation in this regard. In countries like Nepal, even the right to broadcast over the radio have been deregulated; though in most other South Asian countries, governments still retain the final broadcasting rights. The media, especially public or state-owned as an ally of the government has a colonial history in South Asia. Present day Ministries of Information and public broadcasters are yet to shed their character of being propaganda machineries of the state.

The structure of the media domain and its institutional characteristics in South Asia have been heavily influenced by state and public policy. On the one hand is the tendency to view the media as an ally of the state, which in fact has a colonial history. For example, as pointed out during discussions at the Roundtable, most present-day Ministries of Information and Broadcasting in the region actually emerged from the publicity or propaganda establishments of the colonial power. The development of state owned media also bears a significant imprint of state dominance. Across the region, public broadcasting corporations have largely tended to lack sufficient autonomy, with funding and control or at least influence going hand in hand, from appointments to content management, these bodies function at the behest of the state. This remains true notwithstanding developments such as moves towards greater autonomy for state owned media such as in India in the late 1990s. There are also significant questions in terms of investment in technology, sustainability and professionalism of public broadcasting, given that over a period of time, the public sector channels, despite their immense reach, have lost out in popularity to private players and have often ended up chasing revenue through adopting similar models, but less successfully, instead of trying to fulfil the responsibilities and role of a public broadcaster.

Indeed, more often than not public service broadcasting in South Asia has tended to be viewed as broadcasting in the service of the state and particularly showcasing and carrying messages of the government of the day rather than encompassing a more critical view of the public sphere. Wholesale interference by the state in the media domain has often been justified in the name of national interest, such as in the case of the nationalisation of media in Sri Lanka in the decade after independence, which was ostensibly driven by the need to render the media more representative and inclusive but with results to the contrary.

Control over newsprint once formed the core of a significant policy instrument mediating the dynamics between the state and the print media in South Asia with its deregulation across most of the region in the early 1990s marking a new phase in the nature and development of print media (for more on this, see Box 3). In the Indian context, the state has been chary of letting go of control over the airwaves where radio is concerned. While it has auctioned FM bandwiths to private commercial players for entertainment programming, news remains the prerogative of the state. It is only after a long and sustained pressure from the community radio movement that there have been some initiatives towards permitting community radio stations. In the case of Nepal, on the other hand, the freeing of airwaves from state control, including with respect to news, has given rise to a very vibrant community radio scene that, despite concerns over quality (in particular the ethnicised nature of some stations) and sustainability, heralds significant promise in contributing to the creation of a vibrant public discourse on vital issues of public interest.

The end of state monopoly over television and the advent of cable television in the 1990s, a direct result of liberalisation, has given rise to an explosion in news and entertainment television across the region. The sheer number and diversity of private television channels has no doubt contributed to an expansion of the media domain and, in some cases, as for instance in the case of Pakistan, contributed to a widening of the public sphere and resisting undue state power and influence. Yet, at the same time, participants at the Roundtable echoed many of the wider concerns around growth of the electronic media, with the faulty mechanism of television rating points (TRPs) becoming an important factor in the generation of news, views and opinions. This in turn has resulted in the emergence of the media “audience”, or consumers of news, rather than as a public citizenry who needs to be informed. Television as a site of “political theatre”, especially in the form of talk shows, that is compelled to not only generate 24 hour news but also its competitive dramatisation, to attract eyeballs, has often meant the triumph of simplistic and sensational journalism.

The impact of neo-liberal economic reforms and the wave of deregulation that swept across South Asia beginning the late 1980s have had a significant impact on the media landscape in diverse ways. Participants suggested that the quantitative expansion of the media- print and electronic- has to be located within the context of broader factors. In the case of India, the employment of journalists on contract and weaknesses in the legal framework concerning...
employment in the media, such as the Working Journalists Act, has contributed to undermining both autonomy and professionalism within the media.

While the significant growth of the media landscape and the rapid evolution of information and communications technologies also attracted large corporate investments, it brought with it the dangers of a convergence of corporate interests and political influence within the media. It was pointed out that in the case of India, for example, even the Securities and Exchange Board of India had made recommendations with respect to disclosure of media groups’ cross-holdings (stock interests in other business) etc. but these are not adequately enforced. In real terms, this has meant that the nexus between media owners and those invested in corporate power does not have enough checks and balances, and can actually influence, manipulate and distort matters relating to the public interest.

Across the region financial stakes and corporate cross-holdings within the media have paved the way for the creation of powerful oligarchies within the region without adequate checks and balances, with troubling consequences for public interest.

Even though the media has expanded in contemporary South Asia, it has paradoxically been responsible for the localisation of the public sphere within the region. For instance, there are larger, financially stronger media houses in different parts of the region than before, but this does not necessarily imply a wider network of journalists and reporters. Instead, they rely on agencies for news from outside, while relying on localised events and news for content. As some participants pointed out, the growth of district and city editions of newspapers across India or the increasing number of radio and television channels in Nepal that cater to specific ethnic groups or regions, for example, risk narrowing the public sphere by amplifying the local disproportionately and restricting the entry of the global except in its most sensational forms. Such localisation of media discourse may also explain why the phenomenon of ‘paid news’ is becoming an increasing concern, especially as political influence and corporate interests often coalesce in diverse and very specific ways across the region.

The significant corporate power and economic clout wielded by media owners has led to the perception that the media is a force vying for power outside the political process. The recent disclosures in India about media persons being used by powerful corporate lobbyists to influence political processes and public policy in favour of certain commercial interests is a case that lends significant substance to such perceptions. In fact, in most South Asian countries, the media has increasingly positioned itself as the adjudicator of public opinion – more recently and dramatically witnessed in the meteoric rise of television news personalities and their transformation into opinion makers. However, this role is also a selective one; as in countries like Pakistan, the dominant media shied away from taking on the powerful military establishment until it became clear that elite and popular opinion had shifted decisively. Similarly, in Sri Lanka the media played an important role in creating a highly parochial and militaristic public discourse during the final stages of the civil war. While this failure to challenge dominant ideas and prejudices, as an institution, is true of the media in most parts of the world, its impact in South Asia can prove to be even more detrimental. This is perhaps the reason why there is a urgent need to look beyond the current market/state driven dispositions in order to look for alternatives that reflect the polyphonic, layered and complex public spheres in the region.

At the heart of these debates is the question of enhancing professional standards while ensuring media freedoms. The latter is a significant question across the region, with some countries such as Sri Lanka ranking as amongst the most dangerous in the world for journalists, while the treatment of questions and subjects considered ‘sensitive’ may expose journalists to soft and hard controls across all countries in the region. The challenges across the region to media autonomy from state and non-state actors are also significant. From a human rights point of view, however, the state has an obligation to ensure freedom of expression and an independent media. It is in this context that the following suggestions from participants, widely echoed externally, assume critical importance:

a) Truly independent and autonomous public broadcasters;
b) Legislative frameworks that protect and enhance freedom of expression and information as well as the rights of journalists and their associations;
c) Media regulatory authorities that conform to constitutional and internationally recognised standards that guarantee freedom of expression;
d) Codes and standards of professional conduct commensurate with the best national and international practice developed and owned by associations of media persons; and

e) Enforcing transparency and accountability in corporate governance of media institutions.
Box 3. Regulation and Free Markets: Media and State Dynamics in Post Liberalisation India

Sukumar Muralidharan

Among the grounds on which exceptions could be made to the free speech right in India, are the security of the state, the territorial integrity of the nation, public order and decency, contempt of court and rather implausibly, friendly relations with a foreign state. Many of these provisions have been imported into the basic law in several neighbouring South Asian states, with the additional provisions in some cases, such as, for example, restrictions on speech if found inconsistent with the tenets of Islam.

In most of South Asia though, vigilante action has emerged as a more serious threat to free speech, rather than State action or the legal process. This has resulted, in concert with judicial infirmities, in a failure to evolve consistent standards in the application of “reasonable” restrictions on free speech.

In discussing media freedom from a human rights perspective, processes of exclusion are not all that merit attention. Inclusion is crucial, perhaps key. How does the widest possible range of concerns in society gain traction through the media? How could sections that tend to be in a zone of neglect, attain the means to state their case and gain a degree of representation in the media? How could they ensure being a part of the national dialogue?

An example of an active interventionist mode of ensuring this manner of socially desirable outcome would be the “fairness doctrine” which was applicable in U.S. broadcasting till its repeal in 1987. “Fairness” in the use of a public resource such as the broadcast spectrum, required under this doctrine, that adequate time be given to issues of urgent public importance and diverse points of view to be heard. The “fairness doctrine” has since been portrayed as an intrusion into media freedom, and caricatured as a bureaucratic pursuit involving stopwatch measurement of time allocated to various points of view in the media. Its validity in the context of the broadcasting industry has been upheld in the highest judicial forum. But significantly, in the U.S. newspaper industry, where there is neither a process of licensing nor the allocation to a private entity of a resource deemed to be scarce – such as the radio frequency spectrum – public oversight of media content has been held contrary to the free speech right. The assumption is that a competitive media environment is sufficient to ensure that all voices are heard.

The regulatory philosophy in India, in its early phase, made little concession to the theology of competition. Rather, it focused on providing an enabling environment in which a diversity of voices could claim space within the media. The airwaves remained a State monopoly for long and early legislative efforts focused on the print media since the State worked on the conceit that it had an irrefutable claim to representing all the people.

News media is unique in invariably selling its product at a price well below cost of production. For this reason, early attention focused on the need to restrain the possibility of predatory pricing by the larger enterprises. This involved the rationing of official advertising and an interventionist stance to ensure that media enjoying the benefit of large private advertising did not leverage that into a price advantage to drive smaller players out.

India’s Supreme Court however, held this regulatory measure unconstitutional since it could potentially have damaged newspaper profitability by restricting circulation growth. There was no warrant to circumscribe the right to commerce enjoyed by one group of citizens (i.e., the larger media companies) in order to better protect the right to free speech of another group (the smaller media companies). An analogous judicial philosophy underpinned the Court’s ruling striking down the rationing of newsprint in a situation of acute scarcity of the commodity.

In other contexts, the Indian Supreme Court has held that the state-owned broadcaster cannot abuse its monopoly over the air-waves to deny the telecast of a film that has been judged worthy of high honours by an accredited process of peer review. Similarly, a state-owned corporation engaged in a service industry has to ensure that the public has access to media owned by it, even to articulate a viewpoint critical of its services. These rulings upholding the right of public access, are applicable to state-controlled entities and do not stipulate a similar right where the media is privately owned.

Unlike in the past, the resources the media depends upon – newsprint, the broadcast spectrum, and advertising revenue – are no longer considered scarce, regulations ensuring their fair allocation between rival uses ceases to be less relevant.

Official advertising allocations have ceased to be a serious safeguard for media quality and diversity, being used in most instances to ensure conformity with the State diktat. This function of the State agencies is something that the media in the more troubled regions, such as Kashmir and India’s north-eastern states, have experienced at close quarters. It has also been a constant source of pressure for the media in Pakistan, especially the print media in the context of the country’s recent forced-draught incorporation into the “global war on terror”.

The larger media groups though, seem to have successfully weaned themselves off any form of serious dependence on official advertising. This has been especially true of India, more so in the context of the spurt in advertising spending that accompanied the surge in economic growth from about 2003.

Most countries have done away with any form of prior restraint on news media. Yet the regulation of the film medium is still active and vigorous.

The state of the Indian media today, especially its untrammeled commercialism and its conspicuous lack of sensitivity towards those at the lower end of the scale of income and wealth, is known to induce a sense of nostalgia in certain circles. More realistic observers discount any notion of a golden age when the media actually lived up to its mission of speaking for all. But they nevertheless identify a clear shift in 1991, when India ushered in a policy of economic liberalisation and integration with the global economy, unleashing a new dynamic in the media industry.

Today’s media crisis compels a review of some of the strategic choices made over the last two decades. It should be asked, for instance, if the industry did the right thing by itself and its customers from about the mid-1990s, by tying its commercial success to advertising rather than content. In the process, the journalism function was devalued and its essential tenets and processes forgotten, because advertising – always the greater contributor to revenue – needed not just to be accommodated, but actively pampered. Formal mechanisms of censorship may be absent, but the competitive pressure for profits, for winning the favour of advertisers by providing an “editorial context” that privileges celebrities, lifestyles and other matters that contribute little to the quality of the public discourse, remain a powerful source of self-censorship.

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6. NEW MEDIA AND EMERGING SPACES

In different corners of South Asia, more so in the urban centres, the Internet is emerging as a source of alternate views and opinions that attempts to escape the censorship of the state and the market and also as a platform for advocacy and mobilisation. Here, the Internet has become home to several domains of the public sphere, sometimes (or, often, as some would argue) bypassing classical modes of journalism to generate information to a world that is wired. This phenomenon includes individuals and collectives coming together as bloggers – or Internet diarists who maintain log entries – and as commentators, who generate a considerable amount of opinion on everyday matters. Some of the blogs and commentaries are popular and frequently accessed amongst a generation of web-users. Blogs, e-groups, social networking sites, e-campaigns and other modes of mobilisation on the Internet have been in some cases, instrumental in widespread dissemination of information, popularisation of protests and short-term political mobilisation. For instance, young protestors in the Kashmir valley, who had agitated against military excess and occupation through the year (in 2010), often used social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter in order to update their peers about events in the valley. This, and the events of 2007 in Burma that showed the positive ways in which new technology can be used to express dissent under trying conditions.

It is important to recognise that new technological platforms offer new ways of mobilisation as also of archiving: a language of remembrance, against frames of erasure embedded in the dominant methodology of much of mainstream media.

There is no question that the Internet has influenced the way activism and human rights work is performed. With the Internet, word about human rights abuses gets out much faster than ever before, and with the rise of social networking on the Internet, that speed continues to increase exponentially. Where before appeals made via email did the rounds fairly quickly, they now become viral in minutes once they become available on Facebook or Twitter.

Depending on how they are used and by whom, social networks indeed have their trivial side. For each post of information about entertainment or where a user engaged in a social event, there are others who use these tools to raise awareness about human rights violations or disaster relief. These tools, for example, were essential in getting word out about the recent flooding in Pakistan.

Social networking will never replace on-the-ground activism, but in today’s digital world, it can certainly be a trigger to amplify that activism.

Politicians and government functionaries on Twitter are more accessible and accountable. Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was a wonderful presence on Twitter, with an abundance of wit and political insights. His Twitter account is kept alive, as is the issue of his murder, to a far wider global community than if the issues were restricted to local news channels.

While new media has indeed amplified the voices of otherwise marginal voices, sometimes in ways that traditional media has been unable to, it has also been driven by anonymity that can, if pushed, be divisive and fragmented. There is also legitimate concern that blogging and the Internet are useful only inasmuch as they promote sectoral interest and that they are, in some instances, symptomatic of cocooned cacophony. Adaptations to the cyber-environment are dependent upon various material factors that need to come together and as such, this is an environment that is unfamiliar for most citizens of South Asia. The digital divide between cyber haves and have-nots, is created by a range of factors, from access to technology to literacy. While a number of organisations are working on projects that extend the access to and use of the Internet by marginalised groups, there is a long way to go before access is made more equal. Certain technologies, such as cell phones, are more widely accessible than, say, computers and applications using these for social justice and sharing information are emerging.6

That said, developments in information and communications technology (ICT) have led to the expansion of modes of communication in ways that would not have been imaginable even a decade ago. There is, therefore, the need for advocacy groups and rights activists to recognise the reach of the Internet and work around the established wisdom about the class/regional-bias of the digital divide. This is even more pertinent in the face of such technology offering platforms for conservative opinion to be aired. Most South Asian countries have a lively, often disturbing clutch of provocative, minority-baiting blogs and portals. While it is easy to dismiss them as the fantasies of an extremist fringe, their use of audio-visual support in relaying opinion is an aspect that needs to be emphasised.

New media has also offered a window to human rights activists and advocacy groups in South Asia, to be prepared for what is coming next in the realm of technological transformation of mediated public spheres.

Even if the space created for exchange of democratic ideas about similarities and differences, amongst the peoples of South Asia have been small, it is nevertheless important. There are notable alliances within the media, such as Aman-ki-Aasha (Hope-for-Peace), initiated by the Jang Group in Pakistan and Times of India, in India. This joint Pakistan-India initiative has positioned itself as an important contribution by the mainstream media in a much-needed people-driven peace process in the two countries. Besides such alliances, there have also been several innovations in policy regarding broadcasting and information dissemination in South Asia, much of which has been achieved after years of struggle by media practitioners and advocacy groups. For instance, in Nepal, the relaxation of laws on radio broadcasting have seen the proliferation of more than a hundred low-powered FM stations across the country. While some have closed down, many are still operating in areas outside the Kathmandu valley and have been sustained by local communities. Similar changes are being sought in India, with the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting (MIB) now offering licences for community radio all over the country.

The rise of new media technologies has also had a significant impact on the question of the visual image and

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4 This section draws on contributions from Beena Sarwar. She tweets @beenasarwar.

5 See, for example, CG Swara, a citizen journalism platform in Gondi and Hindi, for the Central Gondwana region in India, which uses voice xml technology linking a website to many phone lines.
its politics. Today with the emergence of digital media and new technologies which have democratised the technology of production and distribution, it is difficult to predict the production and circulation of the image which was hitherto under the control of the mainstream media. For instance, in the past, the image of the ‘stone pelters’, was often usually taken from a safe place, such as behind the military ranks and, hence, representing the stone pelters as aggressors. Today, there is a change in the images produced, we have images being produced by the ‘stone pelters’ themselves, we have footage of army atrocities in Kashmir and of women protesting naked in front of an army base in Manipur: a proliferation of images that become iconic and embedded within narratives of resistance. In a sense, one needs to look at the camera today as a pen that can be used in struggles for human rights.

On the flip side, there are attempts to muzzle voices of dissent on the internet, given the challenges they pose to ‘law and order’. For instance, in India, the Information Technology Act of 2000 and the Information Technology Amendment Act, 2008 have provisions which permit the state to block, censor, prosecute and in various ways seek to control free speech on the internet.6

In addition to such innovations and spaces, there is a felt need for creating media monitoring networks that are capable of tracking news, political leanings and opinions expressed in the public domain and presenting alternative perspectives. While there are a few digital resources that do such monitoring and critical commentary, most notably Café Pyala, Groundviews, The Hoot, and Kafila, there is a greater need for sharing of such resources within the region.

There is, therefore, a need to establish, or at least build a consensus towards a trans-regional body that sets some professional standards for media practitioners and also checks the growth of oligarchies within mainstream media. Technological innovations, as stated earlier, are but one such way of doing so. It is in the creative tension between new media advocates and proponents of an ethics-driven traditional media that South Asians can hope for a plurality of public spheres, where their complex, conflict ridden struggles against state power and excess can be best realised.

APPENDIX A. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Nurul Kabir (Bangladesh) – Editor, The Age
Shakawat Liton (Bangladesh) – Senior Journalist, The Daily Star
Neelabh Mishra (India) – Editor, Outlook (Hindi)
Najeeb Mubarki (India) – Assistant Editor, Economic Times
Pamela Philipose (India) – Director, Women’s Features Services
Jatin Desai (India) – Journalist / Pak-India Peoples Forum
Dolly Kikon (India) – Human rights and conflict Researcher
Tapan Bose (India) – South Asians for Human Rights
Amar Kanwar (India) – Independent Film-maker and Artist
Shivam Vij (India) – Journalist / Kafla.org
Sukumar Muralidharan (India) – International Federation of Journalists - South Asia
Kanak Dixit (Nepal) – Editor, Himal South Asian
Prashant Jha (Nepal) – Journalist
Bishnu Raj Upreti (Nepal) – SARCO-NCCR South
Sherry Rehman (Pakistan) – Political activist and former I&B Minister
Beena Sarwar (Pakistan) – Editor, Special Projects/Aman ki Aasha, Jang Group
Ghazi Salahuddin (Pakistan) – The News/Geo TV
Hina Jilani (Pakistan) – Human rights lawyer and Chair, ICHRDP
Nimalka Fernando (Sri Lanka) – Chair, ICHRP and human rights activist
P. Saravanamuttu (Sri Lanka) – Director, Center for Policy Alternatives
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What is the role of the media in the construction of conflict and its human rights implications? How does this contribute to the understanding of human rights questions within the public discourse? What is the nature of media dynamics in South Asia and its influence on public discourse and policy? What are the challenges in speaking about resistance and human rights concerns? What are the influences of the institutions of state and civil society actors on the media?

These and many other questions were discussed at a roundtable on Conflict, the Media and Human Rights in South Asia, convened jointly in November 2010, by the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies of the Tata Institute for Social Sciences, PANOS South Asia and the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP).

This report summarises the discussion around these issues, with viewpoints from journalists, academics and human rights advocates from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The meeting aimed to enhance understanding of how media dynamics in South Asia impact public discourse and how a more informed, inclusive and rational discussion of conflicts and human rights concerns may be promoted.