

GOOD MEDIA, BAD MEDIA

HOW NEWS-MAKING PRACTICES MAKE STORIES NEWS WORTHY AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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On April 3rd 2009 a video was released on Pakistani television channels showing a 17 year old girl being publicly flogged. The incident was reported to have occurred in Swat , Pakistan and as soon as it was first released, was broadcasted on all Pakistani channels soon to be followed by international ones. The same video was also posted online on personal websites, newspaper websites, blogs and Youtube. “Most of what people know comes to them ‘second’ or ‘third’ hand from the mass media...” (Lang and Lang 1966, pp 466) Immediately, after the video's release on media, demonstrations were held all across the country by various groups, political parties and civil society members questioning Taliban (i) and Shariah (ii) As Susan Sontag (1990) puts it, “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph” and the video reinforced the fears of the public against the Talibanization of Pakistan.

The video shows some men in turbans, beards and local attire (*kurta shalwar*) holding the female down while one of them flogs her 34 times on her back. A crowd of men are surrounding this scene witnessing the flogging. The common concern pointed out by human rights activists, women organizations, and many members of the general public alike was the brutality and savageness of the “Neo-Taliban” that had begun creating strong holds in Northern areas of Pakistan . The injustice towards the girl showed that much brutality of the neo-Taliban was towards the vulnerable section of society, i.e the women who were being punished and suppressed to dangerous levels. As a result of the video being made public on local and satellite television channels, the Supreme Court decided to take a suo moto action , asking the victims, witnesses and affected to come forward with their claims (AFP 2009). The relevant district and provincial governments were asked to bring these people forward but no one from either the crowd or the victims came forward and no evidence was found. The case was dropped.

However, what the video release did unfold were debates on various levels raising questions about the authenticity of the video, the timing of the video, media responsibility in news-making, and international and local conspiracies surrounding the “war on terrorism” and Pakistan. Concerns over media responsibility were largely over the question of what makes news and why. Although the overall majority chose to raise their voice, rightly so, against the brutality of the public flogging act, there were voices that came up arguing that media should be more responsible before blasting the television with an unverified or rather, incomplete (taken to mean

out-of-context) video. I am going to take this argument a step further, and show that what happens with videos like these making to news is a process of “other-ing” (Said, 1979) in which we begin to label a set of people dangerously using this label to umbrella any one we despise for the security of our country. As a result, we begin to push further every one that comes under this umbrella label without allowing this enemy a voice – hence increasing the divide between the two sets of people constituting the binaries of good and evil. What proceeds this is the intensification of what is popularly known as “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996).

QUESTIONING THE FACTS

Samar Minallah, a human rights activist, brought the video to the television screens. She received the video from another human rights activist who claimed to have received the video from a local who disapproved of the flogging. She claimed that the video showed a girl called Chand Bibi from Kala Killay village in Swat and that the event took place in March 2009.

Mian Iftikhar Hussain, the spokesperson for North West Frontier Province (NWFP), informed that a girl by the name of Chand Bibi, who was identified to be the person in the video, was tracked down in Kala Killay village but she denied the claims that she was ever flogged. Her husband and other family members also denied the event. Furthermore, no one from the witnesses came forward either (PakTribune, 2009). The Information Minister, following this investigation, in fact even believed that the “incident depicted in the videotape never took place in Swat.”

Moreover, the date of the flogging is also disputed. The people behind the video claimed that the video was a couple of weeks old while others like the Provincial government believed it was an older video. This is of relevance because if the video occurred two weeks before its release, it would imply that the incident took place after Shariah law was imposed in the area. Shariah law was officially imposed in Swat as a result of peace talks between the government and Neo-Taliban in Swat region and was seen by some factions outside the government as a part of leniency on the side of the government. If the video was, however, an older one it would mean that those involved in the flogging were in fact doing so outside Shariah law and the video was being misinterpreted. Although in neither case does the event become any less unjust, the timing of the release of the video does become of importance in understanding the bigger political picture.

The Guardian newspaper quoted the Pakistani Neo-Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan saying “she came out of her house with another guy who was not her husband, so we must punish her” while Adnkronos International (Shahzad 2009) quoted him saying that “it was not officially done by the Neo-Taliban but some people did this in their private capacity.” There were also reports that

said that the girl was in fact seen leaving her house not with a strange man but her own father-in-law (Aalim Online 2009).

The various factual questions that came up after the release of the video, and especially after no evidence came forward following suo moto action by Supreme Court brought to light the question of verification of content in stories and the reliability of news items not just in their content but also in their timing and choice of release.

PRACTICES AND NORMS OF NEWS-MAKING

The video, whether fake or authentic, is in my opinion a good case study to look at in order to understand the dynamics behind news-making and its relevance to the reactions it elicits in a society. Although the source, in this case Samar Minallah and people who provided her the video, may have vested interests in providing this video to the television channels, such as a chance to provide information that promotes their interests, to publicize their ideas, or in some cases, just to get their names and faces into the news (Gans 1980, pp 239) where the media's responsibility comes in is with its choice to make publicly available any video or piece of story. For the purposes of this paper, I will not be studying sources or academic theories around them. My focus will remain on the practices of news-making and what follows as a result of them.

Undoubtedly, if the incident did actually happen, whether recently or not, it is of importance considering the fact that the people of a region may be misusing law, and the government should condemn such actions and take appropriate measures around it. However, it also raises questions regarding the practice of news making on many respects. Firstly, an unverified video (in terms of not just its content but also its timing) was widely publicized on all television channels. Given the relevance of technology, it was also shown on Pakistani satellite channels (like Geo and ARY) which can also be viewed by the diasporas all across the world. Secondly, it raises the concern as to why television channels would choose to rally around one video over other numerous stories which may arguably be of equal if not graver intensity or severity. Thirdly, assuming no malicious intent on the media's end, it brings to attention what news-making practices allow for such videos to be released given their timing in the socio-political context.

I will begin to look at the possible reasons behind the release of an unverified video (un verified both in terms of the story it shows and the timing of the event) and the implications it has on understanding the process of news-making. It is important to bring out here the time pressure that journalists work with given that news is broadcast round the clock. Live television with it has

brought the necessity to release news-worthy material in a very short span of time. Given the time crunch, journalists may not find enough time to verify the content or the context of a story, as is evident in this case. There is also tremendous “competition to public attention” (Roshco 1999, pp 35) which adds to the time crunch and again allows little time to journalists to verify the news item and the story around it before airing it. With the vast number of local news channels, not even including the international ones, available for a viewer to choose from, the immediacy with which a news piece is broken becomes far more relevant to the news channels today because if the right time is missed, the channel may lose “the esteem and attention to his audience” (Roshco 1999, pp 35) at the hands of its rivals.

It is this sense of immediacy and winning the esteem of its audience that makes channels immediately air stories from relatively reliable sources . However, looking at the release and spread of this story with this lens (i.e that news has to be broken around the clock given tremendous competition between television news channels) may not be enough to solve the puzzle posed earlier (i.e how such videos surface without prior verification and with priority over other stories). Knowing that verification may be a concern, journalists may still go ahead and air such a video because of its relevance to “news”. I found the article by Roschco (1999) extremely informative in understanding the criteria journalists may use to decide what makes news. He gives (pp 34) three items, that is recency, immediacy, and currency which work in conjunction to make news. The girl flogging video matched all three items on the journalist's checklist. It was recently discovered (recency), it could be immediately played on television (immediacy) and it was relevant to present concerns of society (currency). I am emphasizing on recently ‘discovered’ rather than recently ‘occurred’ because the time of the flogging incident's occurrence is highly debated.

“Currency is the local angle in the broadcast sense” (Roscho 1999, pp 35) making it relevant to a country's or society's present concerns. USA , Britain and its allies are at war with terrorism and terrorism is deeply rooted with the Taliban who also provide a safe-haven to Al-Qaeda. Pakistan is wrapped up with Afghanistan , in the US and its allies agenda, when it comes to the fears of Talibanization and hence terrorism in that part of the world. Pakistan 's government and army are at war with the Neo-Taliban (or rather Tehreek-e-Taliban) which have established strong holds in some Northern areas of Pakistan . This makes anything that Taliban (or neo-Taliban) does, in the name of law, a matter of relevance and concern to Pakistanis and the world.

Perhaps the above relevance is what I will call *thematically* relevant that is it fits relevantly to a bigger theme or context given the larger time period or era we live in. What makes the incident even more *timely* relevant, time here taken to mean the context provided by recent past or present, was the political peace process which was taking place between the Neo-Taliban and Pakistani government in order to bring some kind of stability to the region during that time of the year. This peace process involved establishing “Nizam-e-Adl” (Order of Justice) in line with

Shariah which was seen by many factions (amongst them political parties with their ethnic and political agendas) as a sign of the government giving in to Neo-Taliban. This ties in well with the concerns that I brought up earlier in the section relating to why this video became more relevant in the eyes of media than other instances of injustice in the country and to the timing of the release of the video.

HOW NEWS BECOMES NEWS-WORTHY

Columnist Ansar Ahmed and Head of Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan Syed Munawwar Hasan, in separate interviews on Geo News Channel on April 3, 2009, amongst others questioned why an unverified video rallied more media and hence public outcry (visible in demonstrations and rallies throughout the country) than Dr. Afia's case, the rape of hundreds of women daily, the drone attacks by United States on the North Western villages of Pakistan, the displacement of Swat refugees as a result of government's war against Neo-Taliban in the region and the insecurity caused to women as a result. The answer, to me, lies in the relevance of the timing of the issue (as explained above) as well as factors that make a story news-worthy and what becomes internalized in society as "common sense".

The criteria of recency, immediacy and currency in news-making process, as explained in the section above, are not enough to figure out how certain stories get selected over others when being publicized on media. If this were the only framework with which to look at news-making process, it would imply that all such news which can be immediately published and are relevant to the time will take a lead on news channels. I find arguments put forward by two writers, Stuart Hall et al and Gadi Wolfsted extremely helpful in adding to the understanding of the debate around the girl-flogging video.

When the video was first released, it was with the claims that the girl was publicly flogged by the Neo-Taliban for being seen with a strange man (and assumedly having unlawful relationship with him) and that this occurred after Shariah law became official in Swat region. According to Gadi Wolfsted (2003, pp 85) a "major factor that increases the news value of an antagonist" (in this case the Neo-Taliban) "is the degree to which they carry out exceptional behavior". The public flogging of a girl fits that definition of "exceptional" or "extraordinary" (Hall et al 1978, pp 250) behavior. However, Hall goes on to say that added to extraordinariness, for a story to have news value, it has to have an element of personal touch to it. It has to be "dramatic...can be personalized so as to point up the essentially human characteristics of...sadness, etc;...and events which can be made to appear part of, an existing newsworthy theme..." The girl's cries for help heard on the video made the video especially disturbing and added that personal sentiment to it. The fact that the flogging was claimed by its sources, to have been carried out by the Neo-Taliban makes it part of the newsworthy theme, as mentioned earlier on Page 7 of this paper.

Stuart Hall et al (1978, pp 250) concluded that given the above mentioned factors are required to build towards the news-worthiness of a story, “journalists will tend to play up the extraordinary, dramatic, tragic, etc. elements in a story in order to enhance its newsworthiness” and that “events which score high on a number of these news values will have greater news potential than ones that do not.” To Wolfsted (2003) “exceptional behavior” is deviant behavior and goes back to his argument that weaker antagonists carry out deviant acts because they are not allowed room in the mainstream politics or share in the same resources as the government or powerful antagonists. Taking this argument into account, the Neo-Taliban, with their enemy status in world politics, will always carry out deviant acts considering their political status in the region and their role in “war on terrorism” and because exceptional or deviant acts are more news worthy, the only image that will come forward of them will be a deviant one. This circular reaction dangerously widens the gap between the haves and the have nots as it does not allow any room for improvement in relations. Instead of giving way to a society which aims to pave ways between differences, this propagates enmities and allows writers along the same school of thought as Samuel Huntington to believe that what exists in society is a clash of civilizations.

PROCESS OF CREATING THE “OTHER”

Shahid Masood, an eminent journalist and political analyst, criticized media's lack of responsibility in showing an unverified video on all channels and creating an outcry about it. He concluded that the Pakistani media was strengthening the Western rhetoric (Reference). Imran Khan's party Tehreek-e-Insaaf (Justice Movement) voiced similar concerns questioning the timing of the release of the video, pointing out that at a time when there are peace agreements underway in Swat region, a video like this automatically strengthens the public's fear against the Neo-Taliban and sways their feelings “along American logic.” (Teeth Maestro 2009). Stuart Hall et al blame professional practice in playing “a key role in reproducing the dominant field of the ruling ideologies” (1978, Pg 256). Since the US war on terrorism has become Pakistan 's war against Neo-Taliban, it can be argued that the politically dominant ideology in Pakistan is the same as the “Western rhetoric” or “American logic” against Neo-Taliban and terrorism.

I find it useful to delve further into news-making practices that allow dominant ideologies, like the ones mentioned above, to seep into media. Stuart Allen (2004), in his book *News Culture*, demonstrates how dominant ideology enters into the “common sense” of media and hence, public. In the case of an unverified video and the claimed story behind it being broadcasted without apparently much opposition, it may be relevant to see how “common sense” dictated that the Neo-Taliban must have committed this act and that it must have occurred Islamically (according to Shariah law) and that this concludes that the women under Neo-Taliban rule must be extremely vulnerable and hence, Neo-Taliban are evil and must be uprooted. Drawing from Gramsci's studies of hegemony and ‘common sense’ Allen (2004, pp 79) explains that

“Hegemony is a matter of ‘common sense.’ ...the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the social world”.

News, therefore, becomes worthy due to its relevancy, currency and immediacy factors. It has to be an extraordinary event that elicits human sentiments. Such a news story is then portrayed in the way “common sense” dictates it to be. This common sense is driven by dominant ideology and the dominant political ideology prevalent in Pakistan these days is that there should be war against terrorism and hence Neo-Taliban, one that is aligned with Western rhetoric against terrorism. Ironically enough, the broadcasting and then repetition of news stories in media only makes this “common sense” more engrained in society. A news piece which is portrayed along these lines runs the risk of representing a group of people as the “evil other” and hence distancing this group of people. As a result the gap between groups is increased. Gadi Wolfsted calls this the principle of cumulative inequality (Wolfsted, 2006 pp 87)

Edward Said argues that “one aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television ... and all the media resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth century academic and imaginative demonology of “the mysterious Orient.” When eminent names within Pakistan like that of Shahid Masood, Imran Khan, Ansar Abbasi raise concerns that the society is falling into “Western rhetoric” or following “American logic,” they are actually thinking along the same lines and also referring to the justification used by the United States and its allies in intervening in Afghanistan in order to save its women. Abu-Lughod (2002) pointed out that after the US intervention in Afghanistan , the then-First Lady Laura Bush said, ‘Because of our recent military gain in much of Afghanistan , women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment....The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women’ (U.S Government 2002)”.

As writers like Robert Fisk, Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali and Edward Said argue, blindly following such rhetoric only accentuates the perceived clash of civilizations. As in the case of this video and the story around it, there was no consideration as to the political or legal history of the region, the cultural background and beliefs of the people, the lack of education in the area or many other factors which need to be necessarily taken into account before labeling them in a certain way. “Although the strategy of contrasting images of Others is not new to political discourse, it was prominent and influential in the political and cultural discourses justifying the 2001–2002 war with Afghanistan that began after terrorist attacks on U.S. targets on September 11, 2001” (Abu-Lughod 2002) . However, as a result of dividing society into good and evil, the enemy being evil and the dominant ideology being good, “people were made to feel very good

and very virtuous by simply participating in the denunciation of the 'evil forces' “ (Mouffe 2005, pp 73)

CONCLUSION

The above case-study is a classic example of an unverified story being released immediately on media channels without due consideration being given to its impact on society. Following the events and debates around the story, it can be concluded that the weakness lies in the news-making procedures and criterion developed for making stories news-worthy. It is the competition for time and prestige that leads journalists to release videos without considering their implications on a group of people or the society at large.

The danger however lies in the strengthening of stereotypes and hence widening of the divide between the enemy and the dominant force. In doing so, the enemy is portrayed as savage and barbaric and in such an environment of enmity, the lack of trust is further aggravated so that it becomes impossible to look at the enemy from a balanced eye. As explained in the paper above, common sense is driven by the dominant ideology and this common sense systematically does not allow the enemy to ever become part of mainstream understanding. In any given situation, various political groups and organizations vying for attention could exploit such stories and the political situation could be made more vulnerable. As a result the enemy will continue to feel secluded and will continue to carry out deviant acts to call for attention.

The term Taliban (the group which was struggling for power in Afghanistan) is commonly used by public and in media to refer to the group called “Tehreek-e-Taliban” (Movement of Taliban) in Pakistan. Some analysts and commentators, like Tariq Ali and Antonio Guistozzi among others, prefer to call this group neo-Taliban because they argue that the current “Taliban” involves those groups which are a reaction to war-on-terrorism and the world politics that ensued after and its aims are more with being against those who are allied with war-on-terrorism.

Shariah, translated as Islamic law, is applied on Muslims and is derived from Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. It is the legal framework based on Islamic jurisprudence which runs the public and private lives of those living under it.

This paper will not deal with Shariah rulings or the understanding of Islamic jurisprudence which requires a different level of expertise. However, it is worth mentioning here that this debate was brought up in both television and print media in Pakistan in order to discuss that what the men in the video were committing in the name of Islamic law was in fact being handled un-Islamically and hence showed that law was being misused.

Suo motu literally meaning “in its own motion” is when the government or law-making agencies decide to take an action or initiate a process without being approached by a victim, witness or others concerned first.

Conspiracy theorists have gone so far as to say that the event was orchestrated and recorded in order to malign the people of Swat. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will take the approach the majority of analysts and commentators took in calling the video “fake” in terms of the claimed names of the girl in, and location and timing of the event.

Another video was released over internet, earlier in 2009, and widely circulated over Facebook especially showing the Pakistani army committing brutal acts against elderly neo-Taliban men in Northern areas of Pakistan.

That is theories around the flogging being either orchestrated or released deliberately at this point when peace process was underway in the region.

Samar Minallah is a human rights activist and documentary-maker in Pakistan. She is an anthropologist by education.

ix I will use “journalists” and “news channels” interchangeably and therefore am not including theories of political economy or the hierarchy between journalists and how that affects their operation within a news channel. Since the paper is concentrating on news-making practices and its impact on society, the theories I will be using to understand the issue are around the same topics too.

x Nizam-e-Adl or Order of Justice was established in Pakistan on April 13, 2009 as a result of peace talks between Pakistan government and Tehreek-e-Taliban in Swat region. This involved the establishment of Shariah rule in the region.

xi Dr. Afia, an MIT grad, was kidnapped along with her three children by agencies within Pakistan 6 years ago and handed over to CIA in United States. She was reported to be imprisoned in Afghanistan first and is now jailed in New York. Amongst her three children, only the eldest (now 13 years old) was found and returned. Her case received attention only last year after Yvonne Ridley began to speak about it. In Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami and Imran Khan's party Tehreek-e-Insaf rallied support for Dr. Afia along with Yvonne Ridley.

xii This is quoted by Lila Abu-Lughod in the article which looks at how images of oppression against women are used to give voice to the American rhetoric of barbarity in the society of the enemy.

xiii See reference

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