



## RAPPORTEURS REPORT

# The Role of Media in Promoting Regional Understanding in South Asia October 28-29, 2014



## Inaugural Session

The 8th South Asia Dialogue conducted over one and a half days, on 28-29 October 2014, was a venture by IDSA to bring together experts from all the SAARC countries as well as Myanmar on one platform to discuss “The Role of Media in Promoting Regional Understanding.”

During the inaugural session, the [Deputy Director General, IDSA, Brigadier Rumel Dahiya \(Retd.\)](#) in his welcome remarks, outlined the importance and the role of the media in South Asia. He said that the annual conference has emerged as a platform for the exchange of views and opinions about various important issues. According to him, media plays an important role in spawning and shaping public awareness and opinion. The role of media in South Asia is very significant. Most of the South Asian States are captives of a zero-sum game, so the media has great responsibility towards creating an environment of trust and understanding. For him most of the South Asian states share the same culture, history, tradition, religion and are economically inter- connected, therefore the role of media assumes great significance.

He also highlighted the negative aspects of free media. Freedom of media according to him, can be dangerous, especially during tough times. The Television Rating Point (TRP) competition among the various TV channels often sensationalises issues pertaining to foreign policy. The discourses in media are often mired in narrowly conceived nationalist templates which far from bridging differences, escalate them. But this does not mean that media is completely irresponsible in the South Asian region. He pointed out various joint media initiatives like *Aman ki Asha* between the *Jang Group* of Pakistan and the *Times Group* of India.

He held that the media is not a monolithic entity. While there are restrictions, and censorship, there is freedom also. The issue of media ownership, the varying influence of English and vernacular media on society and polity as a whole are areas that need much attention. He expressed the hope that the Dialogue organised by IDSA would explore the role of media in shaping public opinion in South Asia; its influence over foreign and security policies; the forces influencing media; the impact of ownership; the role of media in promoting jingoism; and how can media play a role in promoting regional peace and cohesion.

The Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting (Independent Charge), MOS (IC) for Environment, Forest and Climate Change and MOS for Parliamentary Affairs, Government of India, [Shri Prakash Javadekar](#), could not make it in person for the keynote address, due to an urgent commitment. In his [videotaped address](#), he expressed regret for not being able to attend the conference. He said that in the 21st century, the requirements and the expectations of society are much different than earlier. Because it is a fast changing society, it's the expectations of the poor which are now dominating. According to him, India being the largest democracy, was witness to the fact that a huge number of youth and poor went to vote. He held that Prime Minister Modi was given a clear mandate by the people for good governance and for fulfilling their aspirations. He said that it is not only the middle class, but the poor class also which have aspirations - aspirations to get education, aspirations for opportunities, aspirations for dignity and jobs - who voted him into power and they completely believe in his capability. According to him, the media misses the opportunity to get public opinion on board many times. The headlines which appear in various newspaper and TV channels about controversies actually matter little to voters. What will deliver the verdict is sometimes completely different from what the media predicts. He said that media does sometimes find sync with public opinion and gets it right. He said that the strength of the media is that it can shape public opinion and the weakness is that it can fall prey to its own convictions. He said that the media's first challenge is to understand whether it is in sync with the societies thinking. The second is to proactively change society by shaping the minds of people.

According to the minister, all the SAARC countries have different weaknesses, strengths, and sensibilities. The media has an important role in ensuring that the sensibilities of each country are taken into account, and one arrives at a better understanding rather than indulging in sensationalism. He concluded by saying that the social media can be vibrant, that freedom entails responsibilities, and that media has a definite role in promoting regional understanding.

*Report prepared by Dr. Yaqoob-Ul-Hassan, Research Assistant, IDSA.*

## Session I: The Role of Media in Shaping Public Discourse in South Asia

Chairperson: Professor S D Muni

Ashok K. Behuria & Smruti Pattanaik	Rasul Bakhsh Rais	Syed Badrul Ahsan	Amrullah Saleh	Siddharth Varadarajan	Kunda Dixit
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The first session was held on “The Role of Media in Shaping Public Discourse in South Asia” and was moderated by [Professor S.D. Muni](#). In his introductory remarks Professor Muni said that in South Asia the media has a prominent role to play and brings to the fore issues relating to the economy, the polity and corruption. Unfortunately, media plays a poor role in promoting regional cooperation and integration. In Indian newspapers hardly any space is given to the neighbourhood. Though the Indian Express seems to have started, more effort of this nature is needed.

The first presentation of the session was made by [Dr. Ashok Behuria](#) and [Dr. Smruti Pattanaik](#) and the title of presentation was “Media in South Asia: A Panoramic view.” The presentation highlighted the regional variations in the Indian media, the ownership and ideological orientations, the unlimited reach of new media and the patriotism that is seen in media reporting. While discussing the role of media in foreign and security policy, it was pointed out that media is more statist than states and deepens conflict. There is less space for alternative viewpoints. It was pointed out that among the South Asian countries’ posting of media personnel in each other’s country was a problem. The presentation also mentioned preliminary findings from the content analysis of 15 newspapers. Towards the end it was suggested that the portrayal of negative images of the neighbourhood must be avoided.

The second presentation of the session was by [Profesor Rasul Bakhsh Rais](#) who spoke on “The Media and Foreign Policy Discourses in Pakistan.” He pointed out that the media debates in Pakistan centred on democracy, Islam, foreign policy and terrorism. His analyses was focussed on foreign policy and emerged from a study of the print media, with content analyses of two major Urdu and two English language newspapers. He said that most of the writings on foreign policy issues are by soldiers and diplomats. Most of the writings are on India, Afghanistan and Islam and the western world. With regard to India the issues covered pertain to Kashmir, democracy, elections, floods, rise of BJP and India’s regional ambitions. In the English papers the dominant views expressed were that India is democratising and Pakistan should learn lessons from it; India is a rising power and regional power; there is a mismatch between the dreams and capacities of India. There was a unanimity of views that Indo-Pak concerns need to be taken into account. Opinion was divided about whether the emphasis on Kashmir should be reduced while momentum on trade

is improved. The views emerging from the Urdu press veered around to the point that economic relations with India were not desirable unless the Kashmir issue was resolved. With regard to Afghanistan the newspapers suggested that the country has suffered because Afghan leaders have not taken responsibility. A pessimistic view is dominant about what can happen after the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014. There is a view that Pakistan must occupy its legitimate space in Afghanistan and that no country should indulge in activities inimical to Pakistan. Talking about the third consistent theme in the media surveyed, pertaining to Islam and West, Professor Rais mentioned that the dominant view was that there is a clash of civilisations and the US is interested in democracy only where it is compatible with their interests.

The third presentation was made by [Syed Badrul Ahsan](#) who spoke on “Impact of Media Ownership on Reporting.” He focussed on the way the media has been working in Bangladesh. He pointed out that changes had started during Mujib’s regime when he decreed that there would be only four newspapers. Things changed further during the rule of military dictators. He said that in media newsrooms government diktats comes in the form of advice. The government on various occasions, also decides which people to take on TV discussions. He felt that the quality of media would improve only with internal effort. He also talked about the poor financial health of Bangladesh media houses. He mentioned that decisions about the staff to be inducted into media houses are taken by the owners and not by the editors. He said Bangladeshi people are very vocal about politics and this is apparent in journalist unions which are faction-ridden. It is interesting to note that while some journalists have gone to jail for reporting, others have become ministers.

The next presentation was by [Mr. Amrullah Saleh](#) on “Media in Post 9/11 Afghanistan”. He pointed out that free media is a new phenomenon in Afghanistan. In the past, mainly international media was prevalent, with all the players having their peculiar interests in the messages they wanted to convey to the Afghans. He said that post 2001, the media has become a voice for creating public awareness instead of spreading propaganda. He mentioned that the present Afghan media is subsidised by foreign donors and also runs on its own revenue from commercials. He held that the media has now become a tool of accountability and provides a platform for the rise of new leaders. Media is promoting a sense of statehood in Afghanistan. On the negative side, it is also creating friction in the country. The media has politicised society at the mass level and its impact remains to be seen. The bulk of the discussion in the media in Afghanistan focusses on Pakistan, its support for the Taliban and its reasons for supporting the Taliban. He said that Afghans would like to know why Pakistan supports Taliban and not the legitimate government in Afghanistan; they believe that Pakistan has a vested interest in the instability in Afghanistan; they feel that the media in Pakistan reflects the thinking of the establishment; and that the media in Pakistan is Indo-centric. He emphasised that the Afghan media has promoted unanimity at times of calamity.

The last presentation of the session was by [Mr. Kunda Dixit](#) who spoke on “Media in the Age of Intolerance and Terrorism.” He pointed out that in South Asian media, space for news and current affairs is getting narrower. He expressed concern about the trend of ultra commercialised media. He also held the practice of beat journalism responsible for inaccurate reporting. He suggested that the foreign policy was too important to leave to government and that media should reclaim its space.

During the question and answer session several issues came up for discussion. It was pointed out that print media was on the decline and in visual media only roundtable discussions were taking place, which were full of negativity and where people try to outshout each other. A suggestion that Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a creation of the media, was refuted. In response to a suggestion that the military was controlling the narrative in Pakistan, it was stated that the military is not controlling media in Pakistan and intellectual pluralism exists in the country. While some media houses in Pakistan are not driven by ideology, others are, and many news channels focus on Islamic teachings and learning.

***Report prepared by Dr. Anand Kumar, Associate Fellow, IDSA.***

## Session II: State of Media in South Asia: Country Perspectives

Chairperson: Mr Prem Shankar Jha

Saleem K. Safi	Dilrukshi Handunetti	Ibrahim Waheed	Kaberi Gayen	Tenzing Lamsang
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The second session was on the “State of Media in South Asia: Country Perspectives” and was chaired by [Mr. Prem Shankar Jha](#).

The first presentation of the session on the “State of the Pakistani Media” was made by General Asad Durrani. He prefaced his remarks by saying that he was not an expert on the media, nor a media watcher, and was offering his thoughts based on his interactions and observations of the media in Pakistan, shaped by his views as a strategic and defence expert. He pointed out that contrary to popular perception both within and outside Pakistan, the Pakistan Army does not control the media in the country. He observed that the media enjoys a relatively high level of freedom to operate without interference from the army, as is evinced by the behaviour of popular media in the country over the past decade or so, especially in the way it has reported on issues of militancy and civil government. He further noted that ownership of media in Pakistan has changed over the years, with a loss of objectivity and quality. While there has been a sharp increase in the number of media outlets, this has not led to a corresponding increase in analysis and reporting. He suggested that the media in Pakistan is not able to monitor or correct itself and it is incumbent on the audience to ensure that the media is more accountable, through its demands. He said perhaps the media should give space to various narratives and allow people to make up their own mind.

The second presentation was by [Ms. Dilrukshi Handunetti](#) who focussed on the “Promotion of Jingoism in the Region by the Media: The Case of Sri Lanka”. She started her presentation by offering an overview of recent political and societal events in Sri Lanka that have changed the face of Sri Lankan media, alluding to the period since 2009, post the end of the LTTE and the Tamil *Eelam* movement. She said that during her research conducted on both vernacular (Sinhalese) and English medium media, in Sri Lanka, she conclusively identified a massive increase in jingoistic nationalist pro-government rhetoric within Sri Lankan media that is linked to the political changes in Sri Lanka and is supportive of the ruling administration. She had studied media narratives on the LTTE issue and the resulting changes in Sri Lankan foreign policy, as well as how India was portrayed by the media since 2009. She noted that while the vernacular press was unabashed in its support for the government, the previously nuanced English press too had starting taking an overtly pro-government line. She viewed this emanating majoritarian viewpoint as a combination of a few factors: increasing pressure from and suppression of media freedom by the government, a largely pliant majority audience that is happy to subscribe to these ideas and the influence that the current regime exercises on the media through the defence sector.

The third presentation was by [Mr. Ibrahim Waheed](#) whose paper was titled “Maldivian Media: Ownership and Orientation”. He started off with a history of the Maldives and its media, including the different modes of usage of media. Noting that the majority of Maldivian media functioned in Dhivehi- the state language, he said that the use of foreign languages was more common in the non-traditional media sector, especially the internet and some television programmes. Mr. Waheed then provided a break-up of the different sectors in which Maldivian media was divided into, noting the large-scale shift towards the internet and non-traditional media space in recent times. He also pointed out that there exists a hazy line between political parties, organisations and media ownership, with the general consensus amongst the public being that regulatory bodies do not have enough clout or legislative power. He concluded by observing that the cultural diversity of the media in the Maldives was a reflection of the great cultural diversity within the island, and that the media would eventually be able to adapt to the situation, much as the island had done over the past 2000 years.

[Professor Kaberi Gayen](#), spoke next on “Does Media Ownership Really Matter”. She started off by providing a history of media depictions of India and Pakistan from the time of the creation of Bangladeshi media, showing how the coverage oscillated between positive and negative, depending on the party in power. Under the Awami League, the media was generally pro-India and anti-Pakistani, and under the military and its related parties (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiya Party) it was the opposite. Post 1990, after the end of military rule, there was a boom in the print media. There was also a corresponding increase in private television media in 1996, with the de-regulation of the media sector under the caretaker government. Professor Gayen stated that there are currently three models to describe media, and its ownership, and these are particularly linked to political parties and organisations. The models are Liberal Capital (non-partisan but with political leanings), Liberal Capital and Partisan (particularly linked to the Awami League and the BNP) and lastly Pan-Islamic (with a pro-Pakistan tilt, and mouthpieces of the religious conservative factions). In the context of how South Asia is covered by the media, she observed that regional news is largely absent, and limited to updates from agencies; there is some focus on celebrities and bollywood, as well as on cricket – but more as entertainment value, rather than proper sports coverage.

The final speaker, [Mr. Tenzing Lamsang](#) spoke on “The Role of Bhutanese Media in Democratic Evolution and Governance”. He provided a brief history of the emergence of media in Bhutan, tracing its current zenith to 2008 and the impact of the democratisation process in the country, where the media took upon itself the responsibility of shaping the debate on policy formulation, as well as on controlling corruption. Mr. Lamsang highlighted the role of the media in the policy debates on the Pay Commission Reports which were eventually scrapped, after the media’s expose of the unfairness of its suggestions, where only senior bureaucrats and ministers received large salary hikes. He cited the example of the issue of the proposed food tax on junk and sugary foods, and described how it was done away with after the media protested the freedom of choice of consumers. In terms of the anti-corruption struggle, Mr. Lamsang talked about the role of the media in exposing- the Bhutan Lottery scam in cooperation with the Indian media in the states of West Bengal and Kerala, and information on kickbacks and land deals that senior ministers and bureaucrats had been involved in. He summarised the role of the media as that of a watchdog in a nascent democracy. With regard to South Asia, he noted that the Bhutanese media was the only one that did not have a critical anti-India stance, and instead worked with the limitations and opportunities that India provided, providing the government with analyses and commentaries on issues of foreign policy and boundary negotiations.

During the discussion, questions were raised about the state of the radio and its regulation in different South Asian countries; the Pakistani ISI and its control over media (Geo TV) after the Hamid Mir assassination attempt; and how the Bangladeshi media views Taslima Nasreen.

***Report prepared by Mr. Hrishabh Sandhya, Visiting Fellow, IDSA.***



## Session III State of Media in South Asia: Country Perspectives (contd.)

Chairperson: Mr Vinod Sharma

Myo Lwin

Danish Kharokhel

Ahmed Zahir Mohamed

Shruti Pandalai



The third session on the “State of Media in South Asia: Country Perspectives” was moderated by [Mr. Vinod Sharma](#). He stated that the role of media in South Asia has become very crucial. The proactive role played by the media sometimes makes it difficult for the government to take decisions. In India sometimes the media has access to information which it perhaps should not be privy to. Newspapers in India are sold at throwaway prices. Thus, newspapers are relying upon the advertisers for sponsorship. He also stated that media lacks the lexicon to report on foreign affairs and that reporting on foreign policy cannot be jingoistic.

The first presentation of the session was by [Mr. Myo Lwin](#) on “The State of Media in Myanmar”. He analysed the extent to which the media in Myanmar is responsible and educated. He said that since 2012, when the government relaxed censorship, many media houses are writing freely, but some do not realise their responsibilities. According to him Myanmar has around 400 periodicals which are published daily, weekly or monthly and there are around 4400 media people in the country. Mr. Lwin was of the opinion that less than 10 percent of these journalists know about their responsibilities and that media in Myanmar is still very young and is evolving. The daily newspapers in Myanmar are running at a loss while the weekly newspapers are making profit. There is a challenge for the private sector media as it faces competition from the government media, as well as from within. There are some newspapers which are run by ex-military men and some others by politicians. Mr. Lwin stated that the role played by the Press Council is very encouraging. In Myanmar, the government is reluctant to give news to the private media and the private media is keen to get news. Thus, the Press Council is trying to bridge the gap between the government and the private media. Recently the legislature, the judiciary and the executive – the three pillars - have met with the Press Council. The three pillars are of the opinion that media should not be ignored and should improve its working and performance so that it can play the role of the fourth pillar in the country.

[Mr. Danish Karokhel](#) spoke on the “Role of Afghan Media in Promoting Regional Understanding”. He was of the opinion that the Afghan people are fed up with continuing violence in their country. Civil society and the media, in particular has seen expedient growth. The role of the media has been acknowledged in all quarters in the country. He stated that there are four types of media presently active in Afghanistan: state-

run media, private media, foreign media and jihadi media. The problem with the media in Afghanistan is that it is heavily dependent on foreign funding and it is highly politicised and has a political agenda. The dependence of the media on external funding makes it vulnerable to external pressures, particularly those media houses run by politicians and political parties. Mr. Karokhel stated that Afghanistan is a member of regional organisations like the Economic Cooperation Organisation, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. There is great potential in working together on issues like terrorism, drug smuggling, small arms proliferation, child trafficking etc. But unfortunately, most of the media space is captured by material promoting hatred, tension and violence among communities. He feels that this trend should be reversed and more space in the media should be given to the promotion of regional understanding. He also stated that the media has failed to explore commonalities and bring communities closer for fostering historical and cultural ties among people of the region. The role of the Afghan media in promoting regional understanding has not been up to expectations. Afghan media remains preoccupied with the country's internal and security problems and thus does not take much interest in the issues of the neighbouring countries. He suggested that there should be a regional initiative for bringing media together and there should be more networking among the leading media houses and agencies in the region. He also suggested that collaborative projects like *Aman ki Asha* be taken up among regional media groups, in order to highlight common issues so as to bring the people of South Asia closer and to alleviate common misunderstanding among the people.

Speaking on “Media and its Approach Towards the Neighbourhood”, [Mr. Ahmed Zahir Mohamed](#) said that media in Maldives has faced a number of challenges in playing the role of a fourth pillar in society. Even after being given press freedom in 2008, media in Maldives has always fought for its rights. President Nasheed played an important role in bringing press freedom in Maldives and did a remarkable job in this regard. The 2008 constitution of Maldives protects the freedom of expression, but it also states that it should not be ‘contrary to the tenets of Islam’. In December 2012, the parliament passed the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Bill, which imposed a number of limitations on journalists, including a requirement for accreditation by the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC). Over the last few years while the media in Maldives has been relatively free, it faces difficulty in getting access to government information. The number of media outlets have increased recently and greater media diversity has led to improved coverage of major political events. Though there is legal protection for journalists, there have been a number of instances where journalists have been summoned by the police for interrogation about their sources and about the authenticity of the reports published. There have been attacks on media people on several occasions and a number of journalists have been attacked and abducted. Journalists also face attacks from members of political parties while covering political protests in the country.

[Ms. Shruti Pandalai](#) in her presentation “Truth vs Hype: Media, Hyper-nationalism and Impact on Perceptions in India-South Asia Relations” stated that the years 2013 and 2014 have been interesting years for the Indian media. She stated that the foreign affairs coverage in Indian media is myopic and that stories which generate interest are covered while many other important issues are neglected. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bhutan got unprecedented media coverage. Recently, greater importance has been given to state - run media as compared to private media. In the Indian media's coverage of the neighbourhood, Pakistan and China are the two most important countries which get maximum media space. The troubled India-Pakistan relationship, the Kargil conflict, 26/11 Mumbai attacks, China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation, China building ports in Pakistan and other South Asian countries are the some of the issues which have got maximum coverage in the Indian media. Besides, she also identified several systemic challenges which impact the Indian media such as issues of giving visas to the journalists, lack of correspondents in the neighbouring countries due to budget constraints, lack of expertise, lack of reportage on trade and the rise of social media.

The discussion focussed on issues pertaining to how the Indian media has covered the India-China border issue; how the Myanmarese mediapersons view some of their fellow journalists being jailed in their country and how it can affect the transition process in Myanmar; the ideological factors affecting media in the region; media coverage given to Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar; how Myanmar's minority issue, particularly that of the Rohingyas is covered in the national press; the minimalist coverage of Tibet and Xinjiang by the media in the region.

*Report prepared by Dr. Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, Associate Fellow, IDSA.*

## Session IV: Influence of Media on Foreign and Security Policies of States

Chairperson: Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar (Retd.)			
Lakshman F.B. Gunasekara	Khin Maung Soe	Dawa Penjor	Deepak Adhikari



The theme of session IV was “Influence of Media on Foreign and Security Policies of States”. The session was chaired by [Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar \(Retd.\)](#). In his initial remarks the chair stated that the State shapes the discourse. He differentiated between narratives and discourse. Narratives dominate the story and media plays an important role in that.

[Mr. Lakshman F.B. Gunasekara](#) made a presentation on “News Media Re-Presentation and Agenda-Setting in Public Discourse on Foreign Relations: The Case of Sri Lankan Popular Attitudes Towards India”. According to him, the South Asian region witnesses multiple challenges, both inter-state and intra-state. He discussed the general role and societal function of news media as both an industry and as the predominant, and increasingly pervasive, social communication structure of South Asian society. While analysing the core characteristic of the news industry he argued that news media is used as an instrument by a range of non-journalist actors, even including some media owners. He defined the word ‘instrument’ - where the media is primarily seen as a tool, supposedly, for a set of purposes: of apparently, informing, and therefore, instructing and educating people, guiding and motivating people, animating and provoking people. The news media is seen as a useful, and a key instrument, for political management, for ‘development’ and ‘modernisation’, for responding to social crises and issues related to natural disasters. The news media is also, therefore, blamed for seemingly ‘actively’ provoking and arousing people and motivating them - both individually and as groups - to socially harmful and negative behaviour ranging from violence to lesser forms of ‘anti-social’ behaviour. He also argued that in the West the news media has long been well understood, as a commercial industry and little more. The news media comprises commercial, profit-driven companies that function as market-driven entities. They focus on profit if they are to survive and deliver income to their owners who have invested capital in them. He further argued that the news media’s direct income is from advertising. In reality, the news media industry’s ‘product’ that is sold on the market is not ‘news’ at all. The essential, revenue earning ‘product’ is its audience which is provided to advertisers. That audience is the ‘constituency’ in more ways than simply being the target of news production. Indeed, the media labour market successfully recruits workers from the very broad social layers

(or proximate layers) that constitutes the audience. That is, the news producers are broadly part of their audience or, in reverse, the audience constitutes the producers as well. In case of Sri Lanka, the news media functions – in terms of industrial size and impact - mainly in the Sinhala and Tamil languages and hence the news media ‘constituency’ architecture comprises discrete audiences as per ethnicity. In this context, an average Sinhalese perceives India as the source of invasion and intrusion and the source of undermining of ‘Sinhala civilisation’. This shapes the media behaviour that we see in relation to India in Sri Lanka among the Sinhala language news media.

[Mr. Khin Maung Soe](#) made a presentation on the “Role of Media in Shaping Foreign Policy Discourse in Myanmar”. Discussing the history and characteristics of transformation in that country, he observed that media was a restricted sector until 2012. The Myanmar government abandoned its pre-publication censorship in August 2012 on a number of magazines and newspapers, and issues concerning freedom of the press and freedom of speech are of great interest and a matter of controversy. News and information from the opposition, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is now also covered by state-owned media and her own party National League for Democracy is running a weekly journal namely *D.Wave*. Burma’s sudden embrace of democratic reforms has released media from the chokehold of censorship. Because of the new openness, the voice of the political opposition is being granted more space in the media, and publications are increasingly able to openly discuss government policies. Even the publications allied with or owned by the government are following this trend. The government has begun holding press conferences at which media representatives can raise questions. However, the new media in Myanmar is not free from challenges. More openness and a relaxation of censorship pose a challenge for media in Myanmar and the question is whether the media is able to fulfil its role as society's watchdog with no experience to draw on or knowledge of professional ethical standards. Despite that there is a growing importance of media in shaping the foreign policy discourse in Myanmar. The sphere of influence of media is increasing day by day as the coverage of a small news article is very wide these days. In the context of Myanmar, there is an association between the development of mass media and social change, although the degree and direction of this association is still debated upon even after years of study into media influence. Mr. Soe argued that mass media is used as, "an instrument", both more powerful and more flexible than anything in previous existence, for influencing people into certain modes of belief and understanding within society. He concluded that media can and does play a vital role in promoting regional understanding by carrying, for example, national day special reports as they do at *The Myanmar Times* (the leading English Weekly). This gives a chance for foreign ambassadors and business investors in Myanmar to explain to the public what they are doing to contribute to economic development.

[Mr. Dawa Penjor](#) from Bhutan, spoke on “The Role of Bhutanese Media in Amalgamating South Asia: Media’s Quest for a Happy South Asian Society”. He observed that it is a region not just interconnected by land and ocean, but also linked socially, historically, culturally and economically. Yet, there is no trust in one another or one cannot seem to find a common ground for mutual progress, despite creating bodies such as the SAARC. However, one of the positive aspects for the region is its democratic evolution. The entire region now has civilian-led democracies. Democracy and media go hand in hand. With democracy, the number of media has exponentially grown and today, the citizens of South Asian states enjoy better access to information and their capacity to communicate and express themselves has leap frogged compared to a decade ago. Further, with the onset of democracy, it’s not just the journalists and politicians but the common masses that have been harnessing the power of media to voice their concerns and keep the government accountable. At the same time, there has been rapid change in the way media is regulated. Newsprints once controlled by national governments are witnessing greater deregulation and the private papers are considered to be better in content than the state owned ones. Although the number of media outlets continues to grow, South Asia is rated as one of the most dangerous work regions for journalists. Violence against media personnel and impunity against perpetrators continued to remain a major threat to media freedom. Even though the media has expanded and the number of journalists has grown, it has not

contributed to wider coverage of South Asian news; paradoxically it has contributed to higher localisation. He argued that the role of media in the South Asian countries becomes crucial to envision a common regional future of greater economic cooperation and political stability. It is in this context that media can play an instrumental role in promoting cooperation and transforming mindsets and hearts to bring in regional harmony and progress. Therefore, it is important for media to conceptualise South Asia as a 'region' and emphasise the common challenges that confront its people and States. Instead of presenting only the negativities, the media must bring out the best practices from within the South Asian States to be recognised and built upon to further the region's common vision and to address these challenges. Compared to the media in other countries in South Asia, the media in Bhutan is fairly young. With the liberalisation of media licensing after the enactment of the Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Act in 2006, there has been growth of several private media houses. However, one of the biggest flaws in the development of the Bhutanese media is its rural representation and reach. Bhutan seldom features in the South Asian region news streams. The stories from Bhutan that emerge in the South Asia media are either event based or about our pursuit of the Gross National Happiness. At the same time South Asia features erratically in the Bhutanese media. The media content is more local than global. Media influence on foreign or domestic policies is more indirect in nature. Media does not necessarily influence policymakers directly, but may work through public opinion by shaping what people know and believe about foreign politics.

[Mr. Deepak Adhikari](#) spoke on "The Role of Media in Shaping Foreign Policy Discourse in Nepal". He observed that the professional journey of Nepal's news media began in the early 1990s following the restoration of democracy. In the early 1990s, after the promulgation of the constitution that guaranteed press freedom and freedom of expression, among others, a number of media groups were set up, allowing for the first time in Nepal's history, independent and professional voices. *Kantipur Publications*, one of major ventures set up in 1993 by a businessman of Indian origin, took the lead by publishing Nepali and English broadsheet dailies: *Kantipur* and *The Kathmandu Post*. Soon, other media houses followed. But some of them folded after a few years. They could not survive because the market was not ready for proliferation yet. Mere enthusiasm could not sustain a business that required huge financial investment, trained and skilled professionals and a substantial reading public. Foreign affairs reporting evolved in the late 1990s following the extensive coverage of Bhutanese refugees, who were expelled from Bhutan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was the first time Nepal had received such a huge number of people and the news media focused on the issue. In the post conflict period, Nepal has been struggling to draft a constitution through a Constituent Assembly and complete the peace process. Surrounded by India and China, Nepal is also on the cusp of redefining its foreign policy aimed at strengthening its ties in the immediate neighbourhood and expanding its reach. In this context, Nepal's news media has played a significant role in shaping and influencing foreign policy discourse and debate in the country, but the fact remains that it is still a young industry and its members who are learning on the job have a long way to go in terms of making an impact. Nepali news media has failed to engage readers through reportage on foreign policy issues. It has also shied away from publishing more rigorous and well-researched opinion pieces that help policymakers see things from a new, fresh perspective. Nepal's news media has hardly gone beyond covering India and China. It focusses on bilateral visits, parliamentary hearings of the ambassadors-designate and activities of the foreign missions. Academic think tanks too can contribute to the debate. In the past, Nepal had robust university-affiliated research organisations. They didn't cover foreign policy much, but it was an important initiative in the field of knowledge production. But the Tribhuvan University itself was marred by politicisation, frequent transfers of the scholars and protests, leading to the early demise of think tanks. He concluded that Nepali news media is well placed to play a prominent role in creating a vibrant discourse on its foreign policy. It has taken some strides, but must move beyond routine, event-based reporting to doing in-depth reportage and publishing unconventional and forward-looking opinion pieces that help the public understand the complex world of the 21st century.

***Prepared by Dr. Nihar R. Nayak, Associate Fellow, IDSA.***

## Session V: Can Media Play a Role in Promoting Regional Understanding? (Panel Discussion)

Chairperson: Dr Chandan Mitra			
S D Muni	Siddhartha Varadarajan	Nitin Gokhale	Saleem K. Safi
Dilrukshi Handunetti	Amrullah Saleh	Suhasini Haider	Syed Badrul Ahsan
Ibrahim Waheed	Kunda Dixit	Myo Lwin	Dawa Penjor



The theme of session V was “Can Media Play a Role in Promoting Regional Understanding?” The panel discussion was chaired by [Dr. Chandan Mitra](#).

The first speaker of the session was [Mr. Nitin Gokhale](#) who raised important questions like whether the media plays a role in promoting regional understanding in South Asia or not? In his view the media does not play such a role. He noted that there is a perception among India’s neighbouring countries that the Indian media does not care about its neighbours and only provides coverage to these countries during the Prime Minister’s visit. He stated that there is a lack of understanding about South Asian countries in news rooms and that the Indian media is obsessed with Pakistan and China. To overcome these issues he suggested that there should be exchange of media personnel among different countries; governments should make visas available more easily; and that there should be cross posting of articles and viewpoints. He also said that there must be initiatives from institutions across the countries. He also emphasised the need to go beyond jingoism.

Professor Rasul Baksh Rais noted that personally he was pessimistic about media enabling regional understanding. He said that too much hope is being bestowed on media to promote regional understanding. To achieve the goal of regional understanding he said that emphasis must be laid on the State, its powers and policies. He noted that media has limited capacity in either promoting or undermining peace. He said that there is also a wrong assumption often made, that the audience can be manipulated with false stories. He observed that the electronic media is young and important positions are occupied by young journalists and competition often leads to sensationalism. He suggested that columnists in South Asian countries must attempt to publish in each other’s dailies and cultivate a culture of mutual respect. He emphasised the need for representation of government and civil society and the necessity to – conduct and speak with harmony and respect on TV shows; conduct workshops and joint projects in a time bound manner; consider the other’s point of view and try not to promote misunderstanding.

[Mr. Syed Badrul Ahsan](#) said that he wished the partition of the Indian subcontinent had not happened in 1947. He questioned the need to have passports to travel across the South Asian countries. He noted that there is presence of democracy in all South Asian countries. He said that the media should be liberal without any prejudices. He further suggested that the media should understand certain realities and the other country's perspective. He noted that the media should not become a tool in the hands of the establishment. He observed that the media should be focussing on news coverage on both sides of the border and he felt that there was a need to call a spade a spade. He gave the example of how in Bangladesh very few journalists have written about the declining Hindu population or the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh into Indian states, although a section of the Bangladeshi media acknowledges it. He further suggested that there should be cooperative journalism. He also suggested that the media could promote their respective countries' national interest, but be less jingoistic.

[Mr. Amrullah Saleh](#) noted that the monopoly of media has ended with the advent of social media and along with it the 'monopoly of lies' has also ended. He said that currently a large part of the Afghan population has access to means of communication, citing statistics released by the Afghan Ministry of Communication. He noted that the media in Afghanistan can play a vital role in Afghanistan. He said that currently, security and foreign policy issues are some of the prominent subjects which are covered in the Afghan media. He also noted that issues pertaining to Pakistan and Taliban dominate the news in Afghanistan. He said that India has gained centrality in Afghanistan by virtue of its wealth and power. But he noted that India cannot afford to maintain a status quo and that the country needs to do more. He observed that the Indian film industry is very popular in Afghanistan, but Indian media presence is very limited barring a few documentaries. He suggested that there is a need to have a common counter narrative in the region. He brought up the need for exchanges at the strategic level and stressed the need for a common strategic community in South Asia, which could perceive common challenges to the region. He concluded by noting that the media is strong and can bring accountability; that it has reached all corners of society; and that it will be difficult to reverse the process of free media.

[Professor S.D. Muni](#) noted that the media can and must play an important role in promoting regional understanding. He noted the role of South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in promoting such understanding in the region. He said that India's policy had not evolved towards the region, and was focussed on individual countries, but that policy is changing with changing times. He said that India cannot go ahead without its neighbours. He also said that States are the principal stakeholders in foreign policy towards their neighbours and it is the job of the media to stand up if the State is not committed. He said that along with States, there are corporate interests, and the security establishment also has a stake. He also spoke about the corporatisation of media and how some corporate entities have at times encouraged people to write on regional integration.

[Mr. Ibrahim Waheed](#) stated that commercial considerations of media houses should not come in the way of peace. He said that the poorer classes have aspirations. He also spoke at length about the quality of journalists in media houses. He noted that the internet has now become a platform for the common man to have a blog of his own and how inadvertently the truth always prevails. He also questioned the notion that the audience is a product. He also dwelt on the strategic importance of Maldives in South Asia and how the country is contributing as an employer to many Bangladeshi migrants. He noted that this fact is largely unknown amongst the younger population of Bangladesh. Mr. Myo Lwin stated that the media in Myanmar is quite young and it is currently facing capacity problems and issues pertaining to information access from the government and stakeholders. He said that currently there is very little being spoken about regional understanding in Myanmar media. He noted that the media is trying to increase its coverage of issues and there is a requirement of a larger number of people joining journalism. He also observed that media owners need to be more professional and decisions about editorial policy and commercial considerations should be better.

[Mr. Kunda Dixit](#) noted that there has been a lot of complaining about the media and that media houses have to work within the rules. He said that media coverage in countries would always be governed by national interests. He noted that countries like Nepal must not complain that the Indian media does not cover them. He also noted that perceptions often matter more than realities. He observed that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Nepal recently had boosted ties between the two countries, and he dwelt on how Modi had shaped the narrative in Nepal. He observed that relations between India and Nepal are on an even keel and it is now difficult for Nepal's politicians to do India bashing. He spoke on the issue of how foreign policy makers shape the media discourse. He said that everybody has an equal and important role in promoting greater cooperation. He dwelt on how the rise of social media has given rise to the concept of citizen journalists.

Ms. Suhasini Haider stated that the media does not have a role to play in promoting peace or war. She said that it is the media's job to ask questions to their governments. She also said that while the media has certain limitations in promoting regional understanding, it can help do so in the future. She noted that connectivity within the South Asian region is abysmal. She observed that people of different South Asian countries have been brought up with different histories. She said that we do not have the mind-set to shape a South Asian destiny. She questioned the lack of cross-editorial comments in each other's dailies at times of tension. She also spoke about the idea of conflating the media. She expressed the view that journalists must remember that they are humans first, journalists second and citizens last.

[Mr. Dawa Penjor](#) raised the question of how media can be responsible? He noted that South Asia has a lot of commonalities and shared history. He said that we are still living in the past. He stated that the media has an important role in shaping history. On the issue of the role of respective governments to promote regional understanding, he noted that they need to implement actions, policies and frameworks. He also raised the question of how to re-invigorate SAFMA and suggested that individual journalists need to build regional institutions together. He said that the media and journalists have important responsibilities and need to reflect the stories of the people. He observed that the internet, and technology have immense potential to harvest peace activities like *Aman Ki Asha*.

[Ms. Dilrukshi Handunetti](#) made observations about the media being a cooperative enterprise. She spoke about how SAARC can use media as a vehicle to convey ideas. She brought up the issue of lack of connectivity and limitations on travel for journalists and the necessity to revisit this issue. She raised issues pertaining to industry and markets. She said that South Asia is a huge market and that there is a need to understand market dynamics. She suggested that journalists need to share and publish articles together. She noted that Sri Lanka has only one newspaper which has a column on South Asia. She was optimistic and felt that there is hope for the future.

[Mr. Chandan Mitra](#) in his concluding remarks said that each participant has provided something new to the subject. He noted that we tend to praise social media, but there is a downside to it. He observed that often social media is misused for fuelling discord. He said that South Asia has been a place of struggle and contention and will remain so for the next few decades. He stated that it is the responsibility of media journalists to counter misinformation.

***Prepared by Mr. Sanket Sudhir Kulkarni, Visiting Fellow, & Mr. Munshi Zubaer Haque, Visiting Intern, IDSA.***