The Kathmandu Roundtable on Conflict, the Media and Human Rights in South Asia brought together senior media professionals, social scientists, peace and human rights advocates, and security analysts to consider how conflict, peace and human rights questions are discussed in the public domain in South Asia, with a view to understanding how public discourse, especially within the media, can be steered towards enabling a more transparent, well-informed policy response to conflict and violence, with positive human rights outcomes.

This is an overview of the issues discussed in greater detail, including the use of examples, in the full report of the Roundtable available at www.ichrp.org or on request from ichrp@ichrp.org.

### OVERALL CONTEXT
- Conflicts in South Asia have to be understood in the context of a struggle for resources, territory and identity, as well as economic globalisation and the process of nation-state formation.
- Dominant media often masks the tensions between rule of law and countervailing attempts to define national interest and ideas of rights and belonging.
- National security has increasingly become the pre-eminent prism to assess all challenges, including those posed by human rights actors, to the legitimacy of the state.
- Media dynamics in South Asia are shaped by four significant dimensions, all of which impact their ability to effectively reflect human rights concerns:
  - Ownership and control (state-run or commercial) and the institutional practices these give rise to;
  - Representation – understanding who has a right to speak; how and when the media employ experts and opinion-makers to stand in for citizens;
  - General social structure – the multiple public spaces and spheres within which the media is located;
  - Regulatory framework – the national legal and policy frameworks within which the media operates.

### INTRODUCTION

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### DOMINANT MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CONFLICTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA: KEY TENDENCIES

1. Conflict and human rights concerns are often treated episodically rather than as part of complex processes and histories.
2. Human rights concerns are often instrumentalised and subordinated to so-called larger concerns such as “national interest” and “law and order”.
3. The intense competition and the pressure to constantly produce ‘breaking news’ leads to simplistic categorisations and elimination of complexity from analysis.
4. Stereotypes and negative labelling of population groups as well as human rights activists is widespread.
5. Often what constitutes ‘news’ and how the actors in events are represented are the result of ideological biases based on class and other power relations.
6. Situations and voices of marginalised groups in militarised areas receive little attention and it is usually short-term or selective.
7. Driven largely by competition and the need to be different many media outlets are moving from reporting events to becoming interested players: whether it is in terms of events being enacted for media visibility or in terms of proactive involvement through campaigns, polls, help-lines etc.
AGENDA FOR POLICY ACTION

ESTABLISH A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES AND THE MEDIA

The dominant media’s appeal to popular opinion and ‘common sense’ politics often tends to put it at odds with the more critical approaches advocated by human rights advocates. At times, the media stereotypes and even demonises human rights activists and their work. In turn, human rights advocates must review their own approach to the media to:

1. Insist on professional standards rather than privileged access;
2. Work with other sectors of the polity to nurture independent media rather than instrumentalising it or relying on cultivating individual journalists;
3. Shift to a broader, more sustained dialogue and engagement rather than adopting just an issue-based approach.

REVISIT CENSORSHIP AND CONTROL

Censorship of the market: forms of censorship arising from patterns of corporate ownership and control of the media, affected by liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation.

Censorship of the street: non-state actors responding with intimidation, vandalism and violence when the media presents issues in a manner considered ‘undesirable’ or offensive, often leading to media self-censorship.

Censorship is an ubiquitous and integral feature of the South Asian landscape, appearing in various forms and degrees, depending on the issue and the zone of conflict. State and dominant non-state actors often tend to promote disinformation, denial and delegitimation. As well as direct and indirect state censorship, the censorship of the street and of the market also shape the nature of media discourse in South Asia.

REFORM MEDIA STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

- Create effective legislative frameworks that protect and enhance freedom of expression and information as well as the rights of journalists and their associations.
- Set up media regulatory authorities that conform to constitutional and internationally recognised standards that guarantee freedom of expression.
- Encourage associations of media persons to develop codes and standards of professional conduct that are commensurate with the best national and international practice.
- Enforce transparency and accountability in corporate governance of media institutions.

Many public or state-owned media outlets are yet to shed their colonial history and character as propaganda machines of the state.

The post-liberalisation competitive media space has created new spaces and possibilities but also spawned the rise of television news as commodity and political theatre, engendering competitive dramatisation that trivialises or marginalises human rights messages.

Across the region financial stakes and corporate cross-holdings within the media have paved the way for the creation of powerful media corporations within the region without adequate checks and balances.

Find the full report on the web:

Conflict, Media and Human Rights in South Asia: Report from a Roundtable

Or review our earlier work on journalism and human rights.