



APPLICATION OF MEDIA DEPENDENCY THEORY DURING CRISIS: OPS MEGH RAHAT

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Communication in general and mass communication in particular plays an indispensable role in our everyday lives. However, their importance grows manifold during crisis situations. According to the dictionary, "crisis is a condition of instability or danger, as in social, economic, political, or international affairs, leading to a decisive change." Natural disasters fall in this category.

During a natural disaster, apart from other social institutions which work to manage the disaster, the functioning of media becomes crucial. The key role of media is informing the people and the authorities during emergencies. Media plays a vital role in public awareness and preparedness through educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards; gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, helping relief organizations and the public towards specific needs; and even in facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response. During any emergency, people seek up-to date, reliable and detailed information.¹

Amid crisis the media also integrates with other social systems working towards disaster management. Simultaneously, social institutions act as a source of first hand information for the media. Therefore, we witness a scene where multi social institutions depends on each other to inform the masses, save the lives, mobilize the man and the material and above all to attain the common objective of saving lives and bringing back equilibrium to society which is hit by a natural calamity.

Recently, India witnessed floods in Jammu and Kashmir, which not only claimed more than four hundred lives, but also displaced thousands of people and left behind a trail of destruction. According to the Press Trust of India, “The floods caused havoc across many districts of the state in which over 15 lakh families spread over 5,794 villages were affected. As per the assessment received, around 3,44,607 structures have suffered damages, 90,000 cattle and other livestock perished, crop loss reported in 6.52 lakh hectares of land besides huge loss to public and private infrastructure.”

In a bid to save precious lives, the relief and rescue work done by the Indian Army, under the name of Operation Megh Rahat deserves special mention. Op Megh Rahat commenced on 2 September 2014 and ended on 19th September 2014. In the two-week long operation more than 200,000 flood affected people were rescued by the Armed forces from the various parts from the flood-hit state.

The recent natural calamity provides an insight to understand the role of media better and to see its functioning with other social institutions in general, and military in particular. If one sees ‘Operation Megh Rahat’ from the lens of media studies, it emerges as a fair example of Media Dependency theory. The central point of the theory states that people in modern society depend on the media to comprehend and understand the world around them. Melvin Defleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach developed this basic idea in the mid-1970s; though the theory has fallen out of favour today, the central tenets of the work still hold true in post-modern society. The basis of the dependency theory is what Defleur and Ball-Rokeach call an ‘ecological’ model. In this, they see a complex web of links with the mass media and the public at large.ⁱⁱ

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During the floods, we saw how the Indian Army depended on various media platforms, especially the social media and was able to connect to the 'public at large'. The Army largely depended on the media to disseminate information to the masses with regard to ongoing natural calamity and rescue operations and was also able to promote their point of view to the masses. Moreover, we also saw how for the first time, the Indian Army used the social media platform like Facebook, twitter, Whatapp, to provide instant information to the general masses. An Indian army official stated, "An estimated 12,000 people were assisted on the basis of reports received over the social media." In addition to this, we also saw how the media's need for the first hand information on the floods was catered by the armed forces. This dependency reinforces the Defleur and Ball Rokeach views that even though the 'parts may depend on each other, it is a kind of an ecological relationship, not one amongst equals, that forms what dependency relationship.' The media and military are two different entities, with different objectives, different styles of working but still the dependency exist. So, one can say that the media military relationship becomes more important and challenging during the crisis situation.

Moreover, one of the key ideas of the media dependency theory is that the 'Social institutions and media systems interact with audiences to create needs, interests, and motives in the person.' Social institutions, which are established sets of norms and subsystems, support each society's survival. Each sector carries out certain tasks and has different responsibilities that contribute to the overall functioning and stability of a society.ⁱⁱⁱ The military is also one such institution and coverage of Ops Meg Raht by the media and utilization of media tools by military, depicts how different social institutions and media systems interacts and inform the masses. It also depicts how people who may not be directly linked to the present disaster were motivated and mobilized to be a part of the rescue of work and its aftermath still, largely due to media.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ "Role of Media in Disaster Management." National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM). November 4, 2009. Accessed October 15, 2014. <http://nidm.gov.in/idmc2/PDF/Concept/Media.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ McCallum, Michael. "The Dependency Theory of Mass Communication with Australian Examples." Academia.edu. January 1, 2013. Accessed July 30, 2014. http://www.academia.edu/2632078/The_Dependency_theory_of_Mass_Communication_with_Australian_Examples.

ⁱⁱⁱ Devore, K. "Social Institutions: Definition, Examples & Quiz." Educational Portal. January 1, 2014. Accessed July 31, 2014.

