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### Call to regulate media coverage of terror strikes

Indo-Asian News Service

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For scores of journalists, the 60-hour terror trauma in Mumbai was a round-the-clock professional challenge.

But with many berating the "unbridled" and at times "reckless" reportage, the question being asked is whether there should be a mechanism to regulate coverage of such situations that impact on national security.

Several independent media observers feel the media had gone overboard from Nov 26 night to Nov 29 morning and there was a need for regulation to cover such incidents to beam "sensible footage which would desist from whipping up xenophobia and misgivings".

Sevanti Ninan, a senior journalist and media critic, said: "Channels beamed footage non-stop (during the Mumbai attack). You should not have so much of live coverage. Some regulations will have to be put into place for broadcasters to cover situations like Mumbai, which was much more than just terrorism. It was a war."

Ninan suggested there should be no editorialising while giving news and "periodic, not continuous, live telecasts, may be in small blocks on the half-hour."

"Lastly, all footage should be accompanied by time and place so that viewers know whether the images are fresh or old and no hostages released by captors should be interviewed," Ninan told IANS.

Some of the diatribe makes sense as the media broke a few rules to invade victims' emotional space while reporting live - and making some inadvertent leaks in the process that could have put lives in jeopardy.

"I was in Sweden at the time of the attack, but almost every Swedish channel picked it up. But now that I am looking at it, I think the situation merits introspection. We have no crisis management situation," Ranjita Biswas, Kolkata-based senior journalist, feature writer and human rights activist, told IANS.

"Appalling journalism," says Chyetyanya Kunte, a Netherlands-based engineer, on his web blog Nov 27.

"In one instance, Barkha Dutt of NDTV asks a husband about his wife who is either stuck or held as a hostage. The poor guy adds in the end about where she was last hiding. In another instance, a general of sorts suggests that there were no hostages in Oberoi Trident. Then Dutt calls the head of Oberoi (live) and the idiot confirms a possibility of 100 or more people still in to slay," Kunte says.

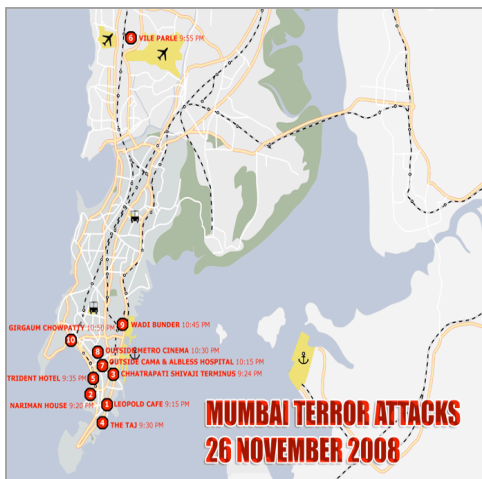
Some observers feel that if the government had wanted to regulate the coverage, it could have done so, and the media alone should not be blamed for trying to make the most of it.

"The navy chief, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Wednesday blamed the national media for irresponsible coverage - calling it 'a disabling instrument' in a press conference," said veteran Delhi-based defence journalist Sujan Dutta, who covered the Kargil and Iraq wars.

"But in reality, forces on the ground wanted to take credit. The Marine Commandos assembled the media in front of Nariman House and addressed it."

"Almost everybody, right from the Anti-Terrorism Squad of the Mumbai police, army and the NSG commandos wanted their 60-hour of fame," he said.

Referring to the 1999 Kargil conflict and drawing analogies, Dutta said the Kargil conflict can be divided in two phases - one till June 23 and the period thereafter.



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"On June 23-24, the army discovered that media coverage had not been regulated. In fact, the army realised that the coverage was working to its advantage because of the patriotism and jingoism sweeping through the country," he said.

During interactions with the press in Kargil, the only war to have been covered by the Indian television live, the army called the media "force multipliers" - which could be used for propaganda, Dutta said.

Some say the media always emerges as the watchdogs' most favourite whipping boy after every disaster or war-like situation.

And as journalist Sankarshan Thakur sums up the debate of freewheeling reportage in his article, "Kiss media, then kick media" Dec 2 - "...the truth, though, is that no arm of authority - civilian or military - seemed to mind."

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