

21st century media challenges

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digital compression, this is indeed the century of the dot com.

Where does Pakistan stand in all this? Barely coping with the fast changing face of technology, the media in our country has to face many challenges if it is to be looked on as a credible source of information and knowledge. In this digital age, look at our basic handicaps: less than 2% own telephones, less than 0.5% have PCs and only 0.3% are connected to the internet. It is an uphill task. Because of the high cost of bandwidth, data pipes through which data communication is established, the cost of using the internet is considered high. However, with the advent of wordless technology the cost of the internet will decrease significantly. The government must allow the private sector to build local area networks (LAN), to access the internet through satellite, accelerating the growth process. With fast-paced development taking place everywhere else, especially at a phenomenal rate in neighbour India, it has given them the potential to overwhelm us, in the words of Sun Tse Tzu, "to win a war without bleeding swords".

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pace retarded by "babus" and the corrupt, the scum of the earth. In the 16th century, Muslims were barely 10% of the population of South Asia but were absolute rulers because they were martial and united. The ghazals and dancing girls then took over and we became enslaved by them. Even today we revel in the "high culture" we achieved, in the process we lost the standing of the Muslims in India. Pakistan is the only reason the Muslim identity remains an entity. While there is neither pleasure nor justification for a minority to rule over a majority, at least we could be on equal footing with the majority. Today Pakistan TV is trying to be a bad imitation of Zee TV, Star TV, Sony TV, Asia TV, etc. We pride ourselves on the quality of our plays, in the process we are in danger of losing our culture and the raison d'être of our existence, the ideological bounds of our religion and culture. TV cannot only be an entertainment medium, primarily it is an instrument of information and education. Entertainment may be popular with the masses and must be disseminated, but a higher duty towards one's independence must not be lost. Make no mistake, this is war

by other means and the enemy has planted a serpent in our midst at ground zero of disseminating electronic information.

TV has been used by successive governments as propaganda tool but the quality of the news remains drab and unimaginative. Like anything controlled by any government, TV is not credible. Every government uses the medium to portray itself as a saviour and messiah to our own population. In this selfish use of the medium by government control, we have lost the credibility battle, a battle we should not have engaged in. The onset of the satellite dish has made the people aware of the quality evident in foreign TV channels—slick, professional and mature, besides being highly informative. PTV thinking was confined to thinking that satellite dishes would confine the threat to the elite to certain urban localities of Pakistan. The sudden mushrooming of cable operators and a multitude of foreign channels at nominal monthly rates have brought the entire world into almost every household. Belatedly the various 90s' governments realized that the threat could not be ignored and set up a second channel via satellite. However, it is to the credit of the present government that they are opening up both terrestrial and satellite television.

Privatization is the only way to go if we want to improve Pakistan's image at an international level. We must also allow a bare conservative, if not entirely liberal, projection of our arts and culture abroad. Again to its credit the military regime has not flinched in the face of religious extremism.

Print media remains as important in less developed countries as in the developed ones, maybe even more. The information is not disseminated only through images on paper but also through the electronic screens. Analysis shows that such reading is very objective. The circulation of the newspaper may not give an accurate figure of how many read an article every week, but many, many times more do read it on the internet on the web pages of the newspapers. To the credit of this regime, it has done something unusual for military, it tolerates an absolutely free press. Contrast our democracies where journalists have been browbeaten and/or detained, maybe beaten also, closed down publications, used the tax machinery for coercion, choked off newsprint supplies, hounded editors out of office, etc. Unfortunately, the English language newspapers have very little circulation in contrast to those in Urdu (and regional languages) and some of those in Urdu have a field day in gossips, scandals, half-truths, misinformation, disaffirmation, etc, the credibility of the print media overall thus becoming quite suspect. This can be rectified if we continue to allow full freedom of the type obtaining now.

The greatest challenge is to sustain the media's credibility, unfortunately government-run institutions are notoriously deficient in that. The responsibility comes onto the shoulders of the private sector, it is their expertise and innovation, thus flexibility in coping with situations as well as a freedom of action that cannot only confront but exploit the challenges of the 21st century. Are we up to taking up this challenge for change or will remain mired in the paralysis of action that is legacy of our bureaucratic past—and to a great extent, the present?