21st century media challenges

ordramatic transformation, no century has been like the 20th. Starting with the radio to inter-active multi-media, the last 100 ve been a revelation, witnessing a mindinformation revolution. Only 40 years e prepared for college-entry examinations, was still considered an amazing contrapountries like Pakistan, making information e from across the globe. Today the world a brought almost physically into our drawns and bedrooms, encapsulated by the TV, ce J Peter pronouncing that, "an ounce of worth a pound of performance". The 20th started with the print media only, despite most overwhelmed by the rapid technologiige, it was still not the force it has become The written word remains a common detor for the media.

adio was the medium that first led us into a new worlds, worlds one could hardly imagl it was television which made the change c. Because of the initial cost it remained a he developed world till much later. For us in d world, the large, unwieldy radio giving handy transistors was change, but as televirst black and white, then colour, came into

es, becoming more popular and ble, radios were relegated to a liminished role. Extensive housese surveys to check TV licences eriod 1998-99 showed that many homes possessed TV but did not he much cheaper radio, particuthe urban areas, where its only ems to be to listen to cricket or commentaries or to some music local FM channel. The VCR and ssette further accentuated this, ng cinemas into the homes. The ind satellite dishes put us into a all game. As we got a taste of real ational culture, we discovered that with all the advantages, the TV lenty of downsides also. Obscenared its ugly head, threatening the s of our youth, subverting the charof our population.

ile in the US, the newspaper iny is doing very well, a stark conowhatis happening in Asia. Nielson Kong, one of the world's leading ders of market research, informa-

and analysis to the consumer products and ces industry, says that there is a paradigm shift diences to TV viewing and a drift in newspaper ership. The images in one's home have resulted reater illiteracy, and for that matter a proporal increase in weight due to greater consumpof food during TV dinner. Into this cauldron of lopment has come the rapid explosion of comr technology, changing everyday lives unlike hing else so far. Computer has come of age, the met revolution is not one of choice anymore, it become a way of life in the more developed ntries and even very rapidly in the less devel-d ones. In the age of the multi-media, of emerce, of on-line transaction, the possibilities endless. Dismantling the barriers of time and ance, the Net has created huge information stores, aped social mores, re-structured the whole corite life and above all transferred the universe a global village. E-commerce has accelerated iness in a most extraordinary and convenient mer, greatly facilitating the consumer, The buzz de today are the web, data bank, e-mail and,

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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 fastpaced 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 blooding swords".

The development of our TV has been dismal, its

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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'etre 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 real-ized 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?