**Covering the circus**

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New media is still uncharted territory and with an ever-evolving landscape, it will be some time before a system of intrinsic checks and balances can take shape.

Taking advantage of this free-for-all and highly divisive medium, political parties were quick to establish their social media presence. Riding on the wave of this murky new digital sphere, they let go of any qualms about breaking the ethical boundary between politics and media. This is something they couldn't do, at least not brazenly, before the dawn of new media.

Digital disruption has allowed for the ease to bargain against our collective ethos of free and fair journalism. We know that compromised journalism is nothing but dirty Public Relations. Yet, when it comes to social media we are more than happy to sleep with the elephant, and often dismissive of what the late Abe Rosenthal, former editor of the New York Times, famously told a reporter who demanded to exercise his right to march in a street protest he was assigned to cover, “Sure, you can sleep with the elephant if you want to, but then you can’t cover the circus.”

The ethical confusion perpetuated by social media vis-a-vis journalism has to an extent spilled into the traditional realm. True, Pakistan has some history of politicised journalism but prior to new media that existed mostly along the fringes, not in the mainstream. In fact, legacy media in Pakistan has had quite an honourable run.

In terms of investment and impact, the increase in audience from print to broadcast was more proportionate than the audience jump from broadcast to digital. That’s why technology and the internet have pushed the matter of media ownership right to the front row of the current media crisis in Pakistan.

The leading argument is that political parties and politicians across the world run media outlets in exercise of their basic and ideological freedoms. But what happens when those freedoms are availed on the back of conflict of interest. Politicians can shout their lungs out; it still wouldn’t change the reality that political ownership has an enormous bearing on media output and carries a huge potential to compromise journalism.

In Turkey, for example, the law prohibits the issuance of broadcasting licence to political parties and also states that they cannot be “direct or indirect shareholders of media service providers.” Malta is another country where a landmark legal challenge is seeking to stop political parties from owning TV stations. Maltese activists argue that the policy to “view TV stations on balance so that they cancel each other out” is simply bad practice. The US is a glaring example of what can happen when TV licences are issued on balance. The mob that attacked the Capitol Hill on Jan 06, 2021 wasn’t suddenly inflamed into action by social media alone; the extreme action was a result of years of consuming politically partisan news media.

Then there are countries like Ukraine where it’s common practice for politicians to own media outlets with the result that oligarchs control main broadcasting stations and the public is left almost voiceless. And we have all witnessed how Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi became the country’s prime minister on the back of his broadcasting business.

Even though politically owned media are subject to the same laws and regulations as others, conflict of interest is a real problem. It's quite a task to tame our impulses when personal and professional interests have the chance to serve each other. The temptation is just too great to leave it vague or unlegislated. The history of media is that of ideals and biases but at the end of the day media is about accountability and a primary allegiance to the public.

That’s why politicians, and especially those in power, should not be allowed to own news channels. As a pillar of state, journalism is a service to the people and should be treated with the same sanctity as the other three pillars. Or else the structure gets lopsided. Freedom of the press should not be allowed to exist only for those who can afford one. A legitimate fear is that the proposed and highly controversial Pakistan Media Development Authority Ordinance might end up doing just that.

The question of conflict of interest is complex and should be dealt with by neutral experts, not by those with vested interests. In this post-truth era, the survival of ethical journalism vitally depends on making sure that politicians don’t get to cover the circus.

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