

Genie out of the bottle

By Syed Irfan Ashraf

Mass Media

DURING the past few months, certain sections of the media have displayed considerable aggression by focusing the bulk of their coverage on President Zardari.

This may be taken as evidence of journalists mustering up the strength to monitor centres of power; yet this also raises questions about a growing tendency in electronic journalism where the media is used as policeman, judge and jury rolled into one.

Let us suppose that the political leadership of the ruling party is corrupt; in that case it is the elected opposition — and not the media — that is required to defend its constitutional jurisdiction by initiating moves inside and outside parliament. If it does not do this, the ethics of balanced coverage demand that the role of the opposition get equal media attention.

Little coverage of this nature is in evidence. President Zardari is portrayed as the villain who enjoys a monopoly over corruption. Not only does this negative exposure defy the rules of objective reporting, it also deceives: inadvertently, it provides safe passage to all other corrupt elements by putting the responsibility on a single person and political party.

The edifice of media ethics rests on the concept of impartiality. However, legal and technological developments over the past decade have led to transformations that are leading the country's embryonic electronic journalism away from ethical ideals.

Can one conclude that the media's aggressiveness is a temporary phenomenon and will wane once Zardari extends his reconciliatory policy to it? If not, then for how long can the media afford to sidestep the principles of objectivity? Both choices bode ill for journalism in Pakistan: the first tests the nerves of traditional power centres, while the second has already produced partisan journalism.

The time is ripe for the media to initiate self-reform, which will help discourage future debate regarding the imposition of external regulations on the fourth estate.

When the electronic media was deregulated in Pak-

It is generally believed that the previous establishment would never have allowed the privatisation of airwaves had it expected the media to become so powerful. Once out of the bottle, the genie rocked the corridors of power by taking a stand against Gen Pervez Musharraf.

Such consolidation of media power in less than a decade was welcomed as a blessing for both democracy and journalism. Yet the fact that the media came to occupy too much space in too little time has had a visible effect. For example, the number of journalists in Pakistan shot up from an estimated 2,000 in 2002 to over 10,000 in 2010; concurrently, the average age dropped from 43 to 27 years. Little qualitative effort was made to improve these 'new' journalists' capacity, and organisations such as press clubs and universities did little for their professional grooming.

The result is a clumsy media circus that is confident in outlook but reckless in its approach. Heavy investment in technology has increased media networks' demands upon their employees, but improving the capabilities of television professionals has not been considered worthwhile. Thus, while the desire for change exists, the capacity for innovation is missing. This is reflected most clearly in the lack of diversity in programme formats, content and vocabulary.

More importantly, certain resourceful elements set the agenda for the news market while the rest of the tribe follows. This is why there is no let-up in sight in terms of Zardari-bashing. Pakistan is witnessing the birth of partisan journalism, where a few media elites set an agenda equivalent to the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

Media professionals now face the challenge of defending their newly won freedoms and keeping pace professionally with the changing times.

Desirable changes in the media will be durable only if they come from within.

When the electronic media was deregulated in Pakistan in 2002, newspaper owners were initially denied licences to discourage possible cartelisation. The then information minister, Sheikh Rashid, supported cross-media ownership by arguing that "who else would risk [such] huge investment in private television channels than those newspaper owners who already have stakes in the field".

Two years later, the relevant Pemra ordinance was repealed and the cause of existing media tycoons furthered.

The concentration of power among a handful of media companies or conglomerates is not the issue here. The real issue is that disregard for media ethics by any one of these groups is enough to set journalism on a dangerous course, particularly since self-regulatory mechanisms in Pakistan are too weak to prevent 'freedom' from turning into a public nuisance.

Since 2004, Pemra has issued over 90 satellite television licences to private investors. By the end of 2006, increasing terror incidents had given the news market an unprecedented boost by creating a voracious audience. Media power was thus strengthened, and over time 26 channels telecasting 24/7 news and views programmes have been launched. The lawyers' movement also played an important role: the media gained unprecedented confidence after having acted as a catalyst during the legal community's agitation. Then, technological developments revolutionised intra- and inter-media networking.

within.

They must realise that the current libertarian approach can hardly serve a professional purpose. This approach — that the freedom of the press is boundless and not subject to constraint by government, society or media ethics — died half a century ago in Europe and has been replaced by the social responsibility model.

Desirable changes in the media sector will be durable only if they come from within. Over the past 15 years, I have worked with all the major media houses and found exploitation in many forms. Most organisations, particularly on the print side, lack a service structure and treat their employees as daily wagers; in even the most well-reputed television channels, journalists work longer hours without adequate recompense. Meanwhile, gender inequality in both the print and electronic media means that half the population is inadequately represented in journalism.

Allegations of corruption against journalists are an open secret and the scandal of media professionals who obtained illegal plots in Islamabad went unnoticed. No section of the media can afford to rashly critique other institutions when it has so much to do in terms of bringing its own house in order. ■

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