

# In the information age

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A genuine agenda for change in Pakistan should focus sharply on information technology. It aligns our educated elite with the cutting edge of global knowledge; it also helps us mitigate our failure to impart literacy to our masses during the 50 years of our existence as a nation state.

Education continues to be a privilege and not a right; it still deepens social polarisation and sharpens class cleavages. Information technology enables us to reach the deprived strata of society while the nation gears up to take at least the next generation to school. At least 62 per cent of our adults are illiterate; this figure rises to 77 per cent for adult women. Even if our elite has lost social compassion, it should have a stake, out of enlightened self-interest, in better informed manpower that would strengthen political institutions, democracy, a law-based state, and health-care facilities which we do not provide at all for nearly half the population.

We have allowed our existing facilities to deteriorate because of inadequate investment in the state-owned mass media sector. Also, the government has been painfully slow in permitting private sector enterprise in radio and television perhaps because of an obsession with a monopolistic control over the dissemination of news.

Conservative sections are beginning to express concern about the 'electronic' media because of the perceived destabilising impact of foreign transmissions flooding an increasing number of our homes. Breathtaking innovations in communication technology are creating a borderless world of sound, images and a bewildering variety of useful as well as pernicious narratives. The seamless globe of the Internet has access to infinite knowledge as well as material that causes anxiety even in the West.

Our conservative leaders can think of nothing better than asking the government to somehow block foreign signals. Airwaves and cyberspace already belong to the market place. The strategy that works best is that of creative competition, not impracticable barriers.

Consider how India anticipated and met the same challenge deriving huge benefits not only in the civil sector but also for its military-industrial complex. It encouraged large-scale investment in knowledge-based industries before a possible glut could make such investment comparatively less attractive. India has been producing 20,000 computer science graduates every year with virtually no unemployment among them. In Bangalore alone, 300 software companies have flourished over the years. In 1995, the Indian software industry registered sales worth \$1.2 billion with a very high annual rate of growth. I have not found a single convincing study why Pakistan could not have done the same. We did not become a soft-

ware state in time probably because the pervasive domestic culture had a bias against science and technology.

India has pursued a balanced strategy to cope with the globalisation of the products of information technology. It has greatly upgraded public sector enterprises including broadcasting services. At the same time, it has opened them liberally to the private sector. India now possesses the infrastructure and product lines that enable it not only to compete economically but also provide relatively better protection to indigenous cultures against alien invasions.

My own brush with the information establishment of the government, though mercifully brief, served as an eye opener. An assignment in information is regarded almost entirely as an assignment in propaganda for the government of the day and against its political rivals. It is extremely difficult to interest the rulers in development of information infrastructure.

My visits to various radio stations revealed a shocking degradation of equip-

Democracy flourishes when it is nurtured by the media with honest reporting and assessment; it shrivels when poisoned by falsehood. Freedom of expression in Pakistan has not failed to create islands of professional pride and morality. Many newspaper groups have distinguished themselves by jealously guarding their independence against unethical pressures. A more remarkable feature of our media has been the courage and professional integrity shown by a number of reporters and columnists by rejecting blandishments as well as psychological coercion.

Knowledge is power. Information technology can add to it as well as act as a great 'multiplier'. It cannot, however, be divorced from the moral parameters that shape the society. Disregarding this ethical constraint has not helped a single government as yet. In the classic phrase of Vaclav Havel, the philosopher-playwright president of the Czech Republic, it is better to opt for "living in truth". Truth endures and empowers human societies; lies perish and leave them debilitated and warped.

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ment. One simply marveled at the ingenuity of our engineers who kept Radio Pakistan on the air. Even the funds required to preserve precious political and cultural archives seemed to be inadequate.

In theory, our sound broadcasting covers 95 per cent of population and has considerable reach overseas. In practice, loss of efficiency and quality greatly reduces its appeal both at home and abroad, particularly for a listener who owns only an average radio set. The plans for high-powered medium and short wave stations seem to be perennially cash-strapped.

PTV was not as yet plunged in a dire financial crisis. However, waves of mutually exclusive and antagonistic orders from military and civilian governments of different political parties had taken a heavy toll of calibre and creativity of talented professionals. The news broadcasts and current affairs programmes for which PTV has a captive audience faced a perpetual crisis of credibility.

Unfortunately, the last two decades have thrown up a small group of self-styled media experts. Whenever they were in positions of influence and authority in the recent past, they were able to convince the rulers that information was an amoral technology and as such, was independent of the intrinsic ethics of the profession of journalism. People in authority accepted their advice uncritically, even enthusiastically, till they lost the legitimacy of their rule in the eyes of the people and discovered that the same faithless technology was now trained on them.

The Ministry of Information is now led by a veteran journalist. It should take the lead in developing along with other departments and agencies of the government an integrated plan to bring about a revolution in knowledge-based industries and in the application of information technology. The existing institutions of electronic media need reformation and renewal. A reconstructed PTV can, probably, finance its own future development. The satellite channel needs imaginative retaining and may need government subsidy for a limited period of time.

It is also time for the private sector to step into television. The public service radio should receive considerable financial support from the government, especially for its long-range transmitters. There should be no hesitation in handing over FM city broadcasting to the private sector. With a regulatory body in place, there is no room for apprehensions either about sound or vision.

There is greatly enhanced interest in current affairs programmes on radio and television. The problem is of indifferent quality perpetuated by the notion that participation in them is a question of patronage and party affiliations. I do not remember a period in our history when people tuned into BBC World Service and CNN in such large numbers. They credit them with accuracy, promptness and quality. Our networks have to fulfil the same criteria. Above all, it would be a question of creating a new culture of aesthetic excellence, truth and professionalism. The media retain their audience only if they instruct and delight at the same time.