

# Information, freedom and a regulatory authority

Shahwar Junaid

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entire factories to be closed down as production in an area becomes unprofitable. Governments that play host to transnationals, on the other hand, are required to have a social conscience and may have to assume responsibility for the future of those made redundant by the moves of transnationals. They are bound by international safeguards for transnational activity and, essentially, powerless to control such activity. Recent activity in the field of information also highlights the peculiar nature of change occurring in the economic environment as the redistribution of wealth, a purpose of socially responsible governments, is set aside for the first time in decades, in pursuit of the free market.

individual level, have changed to a great extent.

Today a child without access to education is considered underprivileged whereas 20 years ago one without two square meals would have been considered really poor. Priorities have changed, therefore, many may decide to go without education as it has been observed that education does not guarantee employment, but the same people may feel that owning a radio or a television receiver for entertainment is necessary, absolutely essential and a palatable source of information. Information is essential but traditional education may not be. The legal system is known to be ineffective therefore slipping into criminal ac-

attempt to get political propaganda out to the rural population where the ruling parties may need to reinforce its presence. It is a cold, politically motivated move and no one is doing anyone favours. It is unlikely that such fragmentation of audiences will be in the national interest in the long run when efforts are being made to integrate the rural population into the mainstream of economic activity.

According to official figures the Press reaches 49 per cent of the national population, perhaps more, due to the multiple readership of newspapers and the tendency of people to gather around a man with a newspaper with a request that he read aloud to them. Radio is popular in both urban and rural areas. It can reach 95 per cent of the population provided they have receivers and choose to tune into the national network. National television can reach 87.8 per cent of the population and covers 38.9 per cent of the total area of the country through five centres and 38 boosters, again provided the population has access to receivers and chooses to switch to local channels. Regional language broadcasts may attract some new viewers but the end product of this move is likely to be further fragmentation of the polity. Independent and officially sponsored research on the subject is essential prior to policy moves. A comparative assessment of the impact of local, national and international news coverage and analysis through government owned corporations and transnational media networks is also required. The lack of credibility of domestic news coverage is known to have diverted audiences to other networks. At this critical point in the development of information technology and communications networks, which are known to be critical determinants of future economic and political change, an interdisciplinary approach to the management of media of communications has become necessary.

A review of the history of regulation of electronic information media in the industrialised countries shows that they have anticipated the impact of various activities on different categories of audiences and never hesitated to act in their interest. Legislation after the event is more of a problem. Regulation of media activity does not necessarily imply the imposition of censorship, nor should such moves be allowed to deteriorate into censorship. To ensure that this does not happen, a code of conduct should be formulated and a statutory media regulatory body should be established through an Act of Parliament.

Regulations governing the grant of licences and scrutiny of those seeking licences should be included in the tasks entrusted to such a body. This should make the process of media privatisation transparent and provide for adjustment in regulatory procedures through open debate. Such bodies exist in the most progressive countries of the world. They are constituted to protect public interest and there is no question of suppressing creativity.

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Workers are being stratified into two major categories, the entrepreneurs, knowledge workers or creators of wealth, and the personal service and production workers who become dispensable as automation takes over. In the industrialised countries the generation of wealth through information activity surpassed agriculture way back in the 1970s. This led to changes in the relative importance of various social groups within nations and economic and political activity at the national, regional and international level.

What confuses the issue for national policy-makers in this field is the abysmal economic condition of the masses. The general public appears to be as poor, or poorer, than ever before, therefore, their state of mind is expected to be the same as that of earlier generations. While the people continue to be poor in economic terms they have acquired a surprising degree of social and political awareness. The nature of poverty, their own perception of poverty as well as their perception of reasons for the origins of that poverty and the methods of the poor for dealing with poverty at the

activity to earn a living is much more common than it used to be. A population with such perceptions can drift in directions that will make it impossible to bring the majority into the mainstream of economic activity in the modern world.

One method of bringing the majority closer to the mainstream of economic activity is through the provision of information about the productive aspects of transnational communications media activity and how information technology is being used to create wealth in the industrialised countries. The importance of this aspect of global information activity must be evaluated along with the generally well known news provision, entertainment and education functions. The use of cable networks needs to be explored not merely for the provision of entertainment but to facilitate business activity.

The decision to lease out FM radio channels to private parties and telecast in regional languages through boosters will lead to a fragmentation of the national audience. These moves must be seen for what they are: a bid to appease local language support groups and an