

Media and social needs

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The print media in Pakistan has started playing an important role in informing and educating its readership on the issues related to governance, corruption, lawlessness and political instability. Over the years its coverage on these issues has been extra-ordinary. Further, occasional investigative reporting and analysis of the situation has done awareness creation, sensitization and even influencing those who matter. Hence, this changed role is laudable and one wishes that this tradition continues.

But are we fully satisfied with the performance of the print media as informer, educator and entertainer? A careful look of the responses of media to these different dimensions of its responsibilities does point towards more failures than successes. This is really disturbing as the reach of print media is confined to an extremely small but very vocal proportion of the population in Pakistan. It is not due to the low literacy level of about 35-40%, but the fact that educated, i.e., those with matriculation certificate or higher education, are slightly over one tenth of the population of this country. Despite all the past efforts, we could manage to bring the number of primary schools to over 115,000, secondary schools to over 9,600, arts and science colleges to over 700, secondary vocational institutions to over 680 and universities to 24. These facilities are totally insufficient to accommodate the relevant age group population. This can be attributed to a rapidly increasing population, but the role of our policy makers in this dismal state of affairs cannot be overruled.

•Such a situation notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is that a unique opportunity has been given to the print media to play its role as its readership is confined to: opinion leaders, policy makers, politicians, multi- and bi-lateral donors and foreigners, government officials, teaching and student community, and genuinely interested public. In fact, this target group then emerges to be the trend setter.

Is media availing of this unique opportunity that is there by default? Well, unfortunately, the answer is in the negative. Let us take a look at the important dimensions of its lapses, omissions and failures. First, the news coverage. One

Yet another disturbing factor is inadequacy of coverage of international events, despite the fact that almost all dailies devote one or two pages to international events. And about the coverage of economic news, the less said the better. The same is true of entertainment.

Then there is the level, quality and reliability of reporting and the related matter of editing. The most serious neglect is the extremely inadequate attention paid, even by the mainstream reporters, to the "investigative reporting" or filing "human interest" reports. Yet another frustrating aspect is the absence of follow-up of the few interesting stories one occasionally finds in the newspapers.

Issues confronting the masses, different areas and regions, nation and economy are conspicuous by their absence. One is interested to know how the country can cope with: industrial slackening, environmental degradation, lower yields in the whole of crop sector and the poor state of the livestock sector, unemployment and poverty, poor labour standards and working conditions, child labour, outdated, non-responsive and low-quality education and training systems, etc.

Media has also failed to educate/inform the readers about a given governmental policy and its implications. One hardly finds adequate coverage on vital issues and implications emanating from government policies such as: privatization, free trade regime, structural adjustment, donors' conditionalities, energy, motorways, etc. One may argue that traditionally two pages devoted by almost all the newspapers known as "opinion pages" are meant for meeting such obligations. Nevertheless it does not absolve the print media of its responsibility to file investigative reports on these vital issues.

What are the reasons for this? It appears that the print media behaves and acts like our policy makers. They design and implement policies for the welfare of the masses without bothering to fully understand the needs and the preferences of the target group. It is assumed that whatever is being prescribed to the citizens, is the most optimal and beneficial for them. It is a rarity to find survey conducted by the mainstream news papers on "the needs of the users."

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The policy of the management might also have been instrumental in leading to the present problems. Print media does need advertisements and the conditionalities of the advertisers cannot be ruled out.

One may also talk about the lack of professional competence