

# Media and the society

Dissemination of information within the society is vital for achieving the political ideals of liberal democracy, says SAMIN KHAN

Wahid  
19/1/99

**W**ag the dog phenomenon (media causing political troubles) may not be as new as media-men would like to assume. Small lies in history have brought down empires. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate lies from truth not just in history but in living events, happenings in our day to day life. Recent times are different.

Media power has reached an unmatched proportion in human history today. Legitimizing this power is another deeper discussion, but from an ethical viewpoint overconcentration of power in one institution is indeed not consistent with the criteria and norms of individual freedom laid down by Mill in his *On Liberty*. The problem of overconcentration of power in the hands of mediemen over formation of political opinion has raised many eyebrows in the West, thanks to some directors of the Hollywood. The concern of the intelligentsia now a days is how media can present facts without fear or favour and vested interest.

The shackles of media power can be broken by bringing various modes of media more into mutual competition and banning sectarian and ethnic propaganda through an international convention under the auspices of the UN. It is good that in the USA, cinema has also started to point flaws in the operation of broadcast news channels. It is good for de-monopolizing facts.

Media's role in Clinton-Lewinsky affair has raised questions rarely asked before, going deeper into the economics, psychology and politics of modern media operations. While mediemen around the world are ex-

ploring answers to these questions, we in Pakistan are faced with our own peculiar problems in this realm. We have developed divergent trends in the operation of our media. While the progress in coverage, quality and professionalism is laudable, there are a number of shortcomings that need to be addressed.

Broadcast media, which has always been the personification of successive prime ministers and their cabinets, has never enjoyed the respect of masses for this obvious reason. Its growth is arrested, and arrested growth ultimately leads to self-degeneration. The critique of print media is that many in this field have been pulled into the power struggle within the society and has overshot the limits of freedom, the paradigm most despised by its champions and founding fathers.

Computer media, currently limited to the privileged class, has a definite and strong future role. The cinema of subcontinent has broken contacts with socio-cultural realities and the seriousness of all educative purposes.

The duty and responsibility of all modes of media are the dissemination of information within the society. This function is vital for achieving the political ideals of liberal de-

mocracy, the paradigm that people should know everything on the basis of which they can intelligently choose and make decisions. Whether these values appeal to our worldview or not, the entire structure of modern liberal democracy is an effort to achieve them.

As the intermediaries of information between senders and receivers media-men acquire strange, sometimes magical powers. They can report, intercept, exaggerate, annihilate and recreate facts. The tempered-with facts may only be in conformity with their personal values and political attitudes. After all facts are not superhuman entities, they are part of the human condition. Ideas of whatever nature if constantly floated through media to a persistently exposed recipient will bring about certain ideological and behavioural changes in him.

The ideal of a free, fair and impartial journalist with an open mind remains, in many cases, a cherished ideal. Some journalists have tilts and ideological orientations similar to political parties and groups with vested interest in a society. Having said that, there are instances when journalists have exhibited excellent journalistic values and utmost integrity without fear or favour. Indeed, they have been

strong and vocal supporters of democracy even during the darkest of martial laws.

Generating revenue by publishing a newspaper is an uphill task, which very few have achieved in Pakistan. There are other implied business advantages of running a paper. The publishing of a newspaper usually supports a total business conglomerate with diverse business activities as constituent parts and also brings politicians and civil servants in close contact, the prerequisite of successful business operations not only in Pakistan but in the entire world.

Beside helping out other businesses, print media has a say in the power structure of the body-politic as pointed out before. The power of the Press over public opinion, which is conceived as the final reference point in arriving at certain conclusions, has put media in a special position unlike other business organizations. Modern media is largely controlled and operated by business interests and is run in conformity with the capitalist model of the economy.

Then there is the case of the media controlled by the government. Pakistan is notorious for its strict control over broadcast media, which is the reflection of our inherent national

and ideological insecurity. This may well be one of the causes of the partial failure of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan, something we never attended to in our political analysis.

Print media is expected to come under increasing pressure in future as its competition with broadcast media for advertising revenue will get more intense. The attention of advertiser to the broadcast media will deplete the revenue from the private sector while survival on government advertisement for a largely circulated daily is very difficult and cannot be sustained in the long run. This does not mean that centuries old institution of the Press will be redundant in the next century, but the future pressure will certainly be to innovate and create new attractions for advertisers.

The long-term future will be the age of individualized computer based media. Currently in the West almost every urban individual is accessible personally by e-mail. Innovations in this mode of media are expected to take over the role of traditional media in the future.

Today even TV channels are offering time for classified low cost advertisements. It is not unexpected then to find that the advertisement market is shrinking for them. This trend may well get certain small newspapers out of business, which is presently the case in Pakistan.

Discrepancies between their professed ideals and the practise, exist in some cases. The print media is inextricably linked to the society's prevailing norms and practices. Hence, one could extend the argument that Pakistan is not far away from being wagged by the tail of the dog.