

The development of communications technologies in the industrialised countries was accelerated by their use for the promotion of commercial enterprise. As a consequence it is only natural that such media should also be used by the industrialised countries to promote their culture and style of consumption outside their own borders in order to capture markets and influence people. Just as mega corporations appeared in other industries and began to work transnationally, so did media conglomerates. There has been unprecedented extension of their activities into Third World countries. The ability of such organisations to create a market for consumables produced by the industrialised countries is paralleled by their ability to create public opinion and affect public policy within and across national borders. This has led to a redistribution of power between the state and state institutions and private corporations that operate from bases in other parts of the world.

The power that the colonising countries exercised directly through their presence in Third World countries prior to World War II is now perceived to be exercised through such organisations. Such organisations may include both entertainment and news transmission transnationals as well as those operating telephone systems, cable systems, computer networks and the transmission lines and satellites through which electronic media reach out across the world. Combined, these media are an important element of modern life at the national, regional and international level because they provide instant access to people, information and knowledge on a scale that is unprecedented.

The impact of transnational media activity has been visible at the political, social, cultural and economic level in Third World countries for several decades now. Some traditionalists assert that the very use of a language other than the mother tongue in an area constitutes the most elementary and basic form of media imperialism because language is a primary form of communication.

Analysis reveals that the use of the term 'imperialism' may be entirely appropriate in

Media: colonising power

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Information managers in developing countries, including Pakistan, continue to find it difficult to adjust policies and take advantage of heightened public awareness, says SHAHWAR JUNAID

a discussion of the use of media by the industrialised West in Third World markets. The term implies the imposition of authority, exploitation of resources through superior force, conquest or the exploitation of technology to which others do not have access: this is what occurs when technology rich countries beam their own concept of appropriate social, cultural and political values at less developed countries, displacing existing value systems and disrupting consumption patterns, which in turn has an impact on production. Publications, printed matter and a great deal of educational material emanates from the same sources and reinforces the effect of electronic media through education and vice versa. As a result there is an imbalance between the impact and reach of indigenous material and material that originates in the industrialised West.

Information activity has an impact on every sphere of human activity. The economy has been profoundly affected by the development of new media of communication. The production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge accounts for a larger proportion of economic activity now than ever before in the developed countries. Imagine the power of those who control the development and use of technologies that have such a broad based capacity to influence thought. In the United States, knowledge activity was estimated to account for between 30-40 per cent of the gross national product over twenty years ago: the knowledge economy had overtaken agriculture as a producer. In less developed countries, transnational satellite communication agencies are introducing new lifestyles, new consumption patterns, thus creating new mar-

kets for consumables and commodities produced in the West. There is a difference between the acquisition of knowledge and the acquisition of consumables.

Transnational media activity is supplemented by changing global production patterns and the proliferation of enterprises that are routinely involved in trade, commerce and production in many countries. The management of such far-flung enterprises also requires the use of various sets of media of communication at different stages of activity. For instance, telecommunications and computer networks may be needed to seal a contract, set up a project, control management and production and move goods, while transnational satellite entertainment and advertising may be needed to create new markets in different parts of the world. All these activities are inextricably woven into webs of technologies, conglomerates using technologies, countries within which they operate, labour employed in production, and people who consume the end product.

It has been observed that communications flows and media originating in the United States enjoy global hegemony not only because of the outreach of US-based conglomerates and their subsidiaries but also due to the sheer volume of software of American origin that is available in the market at competitive rates. The implications of this observation are far-reaching. About three decades ago the United States business system shifted its almost exclusive concern with domestic markets to far-ranging international operations. At about the same time the US knowledge industry, which produces and distributes information and shapes public con-

sciousness, became internationalised. Image and information creation came to be managed by giant organisations with a global reach. International markets became extremely important for US organisations as the revenues from international sales began to overtake revenues from domestic sales.

There is a real need to take measures to protect the cultural integrity of nations, particularly in view of the fact that the production of mass communication material, or software, continues to remain in the hands of the industrialised countries. This is possible, but vision is needed to create strategies that can protect value systems without being retrogressive. It has been observed that there is a very limited market in the industrialised countries for media material originating in the less developed countries. The market between developing countries is even more limited for a number of reasons. This means that material produced in less developed countries will continue to have a small market and be relatively expensive despite lower costs of production. In fact there continues to be only a very limited market in the United States for material produced in Europe, and similarly, a limited market even between European countries.

The sheer quantity of United States origin software in circulation is overwhelming. It has also been observed that the communication penetration of less developed countries comes about easily because their institutions are weak and unable to resist outside influences or match them with equally powerful and attractive messages. As a consequence, communications structures can be imposed almost intact in their societies, bringing in

both software and hardware of sophisticated, commercialised systems. The provision of news, the character of recreation, the very definition of reality can be supplied by imported information systems. Alien value systems can be imposed through the activities of such networks. With this understanding comes the realisation that the communication war for the minds of the less advantaged of the world may be lost before it has even begun in earnest.

The drafting of a new world information order in which a two way flow of information was advocated along with protection from the information blitz originating in the west, is a case in point. After the first draft of a report on existing systems in the West was published in the late 1970s, a number of industrialised countries including the United States dropped membership of UNESCO. The reaction at the time was an indication of attitudes towards political and economic relations at the international level. Their view was that by questioning the validity of the free flow of information, less developed countries were being retrogressive and that personal preferences and market forces should be allowed to determine the information environment. The severe reaction of the industrialised countries to the call for reform of information systems and an assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of the free flow of information indicates how important these systems and processes are as a means of influencing the Third World.

Awareness of repercussions of the impact of the information environment on individuals, political, social, cultural and economic systems, has filtered down to the general public. There is a vague discomfort with the existing information environment and the choices available. However, information managers in developing countries, including Pakistan, continue to find it difficult to adjust policies and take advantage of heightened public awareness. This can only be done by involving the public in policy making in public and private sector information activity. This would, of course, entail giving up manipulative prerogatives in this field.