

Media's role: wrong side up

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HOW to write about the reality and not write about the PPP government and the PML(N) opposition, the MQM and killings in Karachi, incidents of bank robbery and abduction, or the co-operatives scam and the Mehran Bank scandal? This is the reality, isn't it? Perhaps not.

The information revolution is one of the greatest revolutions of the modern times. Contrary to what is generally believed, the media does not reflect the reality as it exists in an organised society as faithfully as it projects the dysfunctional aspects of a social or political system. In other words, it seeks to blow out of all proportions the marginal, non-working and pathological aspects of a system. The media in Pakistan is no exception. In the West, the loss of the public owing to this fundamental characteristic of the media is partially compensated by extensive news coverages of economy, sports, environmental issues including weather as well as a constant flow of information about social issues through regular opinion polls. In Pakistan the loss of the articulate section of the public, owing to media's focus on certain issues carrying the potential to destabilise the system even at a minuscule level, is horrendous.

There are two glaring examples of the fall-out of this grim state of affairs: first, community consciousness is the most visible casualty under the current news structure. There is far less news about the way the people's grievances relating to violent or non-violent nature of encroachments on their rights to life, expression, association, or property are processed through the police, the magistracy, the legal community and the judiciary. Millions of people living in villages and towns all around the country from Peshawar to Karachi are suffering from various maladies rooted in the delivery system of the state. However, the relatively less-than-explosive level of their suffering keeps them from qualifying as the proper news material. It keeps those from other provinces, districts, classes, tribes and clans from developing a comprehensive level of consciousness about the larger community as a whole and feel responsible about it.

Secondly, the domination of the media coverage by the dysfunctional aspects at the cost of the functional aspects of the system breeds frustration and cynicism rather than a commitment to arrest the process of institutional decline. Information about the working of the system and various sub-systems such as educational, judicial, administrative, political, legal, and constitutional systems is grossly lacking. The level of civic consciousness is pathetically low. The first step in the direction of general mobilisation in favour of improvement in civic life is the supply of information about the philosophy and rationale of the currently operative traffic system, education system, parliamentary system and various other systems.

Such lack of information — not only about the functional aspects of the system but also

about people interacting with it at various levels — has created a false image of social reality as reflected through the actions of such perceived doers and wrongdoers as political leaders, feudal lords, industrialists and sectarian *ulema*. Most of them are discussed in terms of corruption vs accountability, bigotry vs tolerance, exploitation vs welfare orientation, and arrogance vs accommodation. The discussion moves around two poles: condemning the practice and promoting the ideal. In this way, the public opinion continues to move in circles.

Meanwhile, the PIA flights take off and land roughly keeping a track of their schedule. The trains continue to slide on the railway tracks. Shops are full of consumer goods either imported from abroad or manufactured in Pakistan. Medical, educational, legal, architectural, and religious services are daily bought and sold by millions of people. The process of supply of foodstuff by agricultural pro-

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ducers to urban consumers is almost invisible.

This relative invisibility which characterises the normal functioning of the system in Pakistan has contributed to the neglect of the most productive elements in society and, by corollary, to elimination of social agenda from public life. The non-coverage of normal productive activity by the national media has contributed to status quo-orientation among decision makers on the one hand, and the informed public on the other. The theme of conflict resolution has stolen the limelight at the expense of the far more significant process of production and consumption of goods and services. Thus, confrontation between the PPP and the PML(N), PPP and MQM, MQM(A) and MQM(H), Shia and Sunni, the Malakand Islamic activists and the government, the Bugtis and Raisanis and various other hostile patterns of behaviour has constantly provided news headlines.

The peasant, the ultimate producer in an

agricultural society like Pakistan, is totally absent from the news, except when he is engaged in factional killing. Woman, the least visible but the most important producer of services within the four walls of the house in a patriarchal society such as ours, is simply not the news. She is news only when burnt, raped, molested, abducted or otherwise transformed into a public entertainer. Industrial labour is no news when not organised but good news when organised, mobilised and then mauled and maimed. Those belonging to minority groups do not make headlines except when attacked, tortured or killed.

Incidents of violence — ethnic, sectarian and criminal in Karachi, sectarian in Punjab, tribal in Balochistan and anti-state in Malakand-NWFP — are regularly projected by the media. Such coverage is scandalous and in the long run meaningless. It misses out on the social conditions leading to violence as well as individual misery in the aftermath of violence. For example, possession of illegal weapons by people or existence of hostility between two or more sects, ethnic groups or tribes as potential ingredients of violence does not make news. Brimful is not news, spillover is news. Similarly, a living victim of violence — a woman raped and traumatised or a man left with broken legs — is no news.

Feeding the society with half-truths, lies or at best statements lacking credibility or relevance or both continues to be the practice of opinion makers of all kinds operating at all levels. Unless traffic rules are well-defined and made the basis of mobility in every sector, traffic encroachments are eliminated, traffic violations are rationally penalised and the traffic system is based on a rational proportion of mobile vehicles vis-a-vis the road capacity, simple reporting of traffic accidents would make hollow reading. Similarly, if education mafias' hold over universities and drift of campus activity towards non-educational activity is not reported in full and in time, there is no use bemoaning the delinquent student behaviour.

Unfortunately, there is no scholarly research, no opinion polls and no media investigation into such critical issues as: political attitudes between two elections; labour's situation in a non-strike situation; women's plight in a normal household; burden of feeding millions on the national exchequer in a non-shortage situation; and provision of health facilities for the general public before a possible breakdown of the system or a possible mass upsurge.

Crisis-orientation of the current information structure is essentially — though indirectly — geared towards the maintenance of the status quo. It unwittingly stresses the need to bring the system back to equilibrium. All change-oriented agenda is sacrificed in the process. What is needed is a broad-based coverage of the relatively non-violent aspects of the organised society in Pakistan. This will lead to an opening for improvement in policy in the short term and development of citizen orientations in the longer term.