

Media, truth and life

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Nation

Javed Jabbar

One way to deal with the vast scope of "Media in South Asia" is to identify a singular factor having relevance across the region, embracing all aspects of media and communication.

When we look at how media sector has grown over the concluding decade of the 20th century and when we project present trends over next decade, the most visible factor becomes the use of satellites. Satellites are that single, common element shaping and driving development of media across the globe. Most appropriately, two veteran BBC radio broadcasters have recently launched their book titled: *Satellites over South Asia* by William Crawley and David Page, a most timely and comprehensive study.

The most intrusive expression of the emergence of satellites is increase in satellite TV channels, most of them Indian, beamed across South Asia. Satellites also benefits other sectors of rapid change such as telecommunication, information technology and new permutations in kaleidoscopic world of convergence and creativity.

Several concerns have emerged as satellites in outer space exert direct impact on our inner space. One is status of relationship between official State and governmental systems with privately owned transnational satellites not subject to individual national laws and social norms.

A second concern is hegemony of media content, re-inforcing asymmetry in size of nations, with one being larger than all the other six combined, threatening suffocation. In this respect, there is undue anxiety. The quality of content is king. And queen! As long as content is good and true, there will always be an audience, whether there are 100 or 1000 Indian TV channels.

The third is the perennial question as to whether any technology is truly value-free and neutral or whether values and distortions are in-built into the technology, transmitting them as freely as the content they convey.

Even as we consider the concerns, it is clear the sheer proliferation of TV channels and other media is spreading freedom of choice. We now have the luxury of selecting from a variety, from FM radio channels to video tapes to satellite TV to daily newspapers to weekly magazines to monthly periodicals and also their web-pages to cable TV. Yet this prolif

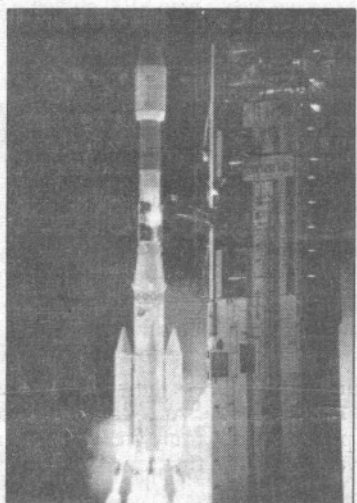
dull. Because news media don't work to find exciting real drama sometimes concealed under the bland cover of normalcy or predictability. In one sense, sheer laziness and indolence becomes the *sine qua non* of news. This needs change because news media foster myopic moroseness unable to see hope even right under the nose.

There is question of basic competence in news media. This relates to reporting of truth or at least close realities. Is truth as important or more important than human life itself? When it comes to sanctity of human life, for example, we ensure an airline pilot goes through rigorous training before entrusted with safety of several human.

Initial qualification for an airline pilot is not enough. Every few months he is required to pass physical and medical tests. If there is a change in blood pressure, heart beat, or any other faculty impairing performance, he is grounded. Similarly, in other professions vital to human life, progress and governance such as medical doctors, para-medics, civil service officers, scientists and technologists—all of them go through very demanding and exhaustive education and training before qualifying for their tasks. Some continue to be subject to frequent reviews of their performance as a precondition for continuance in their jobs. There are no corresponding tests for journalists. Indeed, the more senior a journalist the more opinionated he becomes. Any similar rigidity in a doctor or a scientist indicating a mind closed to new data and new perspectives would become an automatic disqualification.

In contrast, a news journalist providing material upon which audiences formulate perceptions and convictions about the truth, is subjected to a fraction of the pilot's prior education and examination. He may get a degree in journalism from a university. Often, he learns on the job. If not already infected by the well-diagnosed "self-inflicted wound of cynicism", he and his peers make sure he acquires it!

Thereafter, the average news reporter, sub-editor, editor, columnist acquire viruses of preconceptions. Bias enters the blood-stream. This is possibly a perfectly understandable, inevitable, professional, occupational hazard. It is like: if working



Launching satellite

eration is also a fragmentation, separating societies into groups and classes. Though choice cuts across traditional barriers, specialization and specification re-inforces separateness and creates new entrappings of the mind.

Proliferation of media also diffuses and softens content, eroding the sharpness and identity of content. Thus, despite being under the same shadow of satellites, we are also being divided into our own individual, parochial psyches and mind-sets. The media and audiences of indigenous languages are a vivid illustration. The trilingual worlds of the Press as in Sri Lanka, in Sinhalese, Tamil and English, in Pakistan as in Urdu, Sindhi and English are two obvious examples while India, with its far larger scale heterogeneity is an extraordinary manifestation of this reality.

Fortunately in The Maldives and in Bangladesh, we have two examples of a singular linguistic and ethnic identity for the people and the media. though the English Press in Bangladesh in particular reflects a dichotomous trend.

In this respect, there is a self-defeating facet to media proliferation because the more they proliferate, the more they alienate. This effect is related to celebration of pluralism across the region and within each country. Yes, there is a unique richness in generous variety of dialects, languages, life-styles, races and faiths within most of our countries. But when does the pluralism of cultures become the disintegration of our nation-States?

Media proliferation continues with media poverty. Due to high illiteracy, high cost of media, income poverty, low number of privately owned electronic media units (e.g. 1600 private radio stations for 60 million people in Turkey, 25 radio stations in all, for 140 million people in Pakistan), erratic official policies, media scarcity prevails. The variability in the quality of content within each mass medium and the relative degree of audience attention given to different segments of the content within a particular medium are also sources of concern.

Newspaper headlines on the front page get 100 percent readership. Often they are inadequately descriptive, sometimes misleading, on occasion, false. This aspect is relevant because, after headlines readership declines appreciably. Less than 100 percent readers read the entire text. Surveys show the least-read part is possibly the most important: the editorial! In it a cool, considered, analytical view is produced of the bewildering barrage of news printed each day. And those pieces get least attention.

Alas, raw data and information reaches every one. But they are like crude oil. By the time it is refined into wisdom in the form of op-ed pieces or editorials, the audience has shifted attention. Media have adopted superficial event-based approach to defining what constitutes news. Too much of the time; only bad news is good news. Good news is one indeed as

ing patients with a terrible epidemic, at some point or another, the medical staff may also get infected. Journalists deal so often, like policemen and politicians, with the under-side of human nature they become congenitally sceptical.

Whatever the reasons and however great our sympathy for the difficult work journalists do, the fact remains they are never subjected to the intellectual, mental equivalent of the rigorous, meticulous examination to which airline pilots and some other professionals are subjected. Of course, if a journalist commits outright criminal action or outrageous professional misdemeanour, he is dismissed or disgraced. Yet often, journalists responsible for the terrible three Ds, the three diseases called distortion, defamation amid disinformation, get away scot-free because the slogan of "freedom of expression", protects them from accountability to which other professions are subject.

A critical view of journalism does not mean lack of respect for the profession and many of its courageous and gifted practitioners. Being so important they evoke deep concerns about their weaknesses and strengths.

Thus, life - fortunately? - remains more important than truth for there would be no truth without life. Or 'would it'?! In conclusion, to the need for a greater media. The challenge of the USA is to ensure the greater the freedom some freedom does not become someone else's repression.

Media in even the most open society is subject to regulation. Even UK where courts act quickly against libel, the need for a Press Complaints Council is acknowledged. The Council receives hundreds of complaints against Press each year. Even in USA with its first amendment to the Constitution prohibiting any law curtailing speech there is the Federal Communications Commission to supervise the mundane but essential aspects of electronic media's operation. While self-regulation is an ideal, self-interest of media proprietors and practitioners prevents it from being complete prescription. The real and potential perils of exclusive State regulation are illustrated in the history of South Asia.

Only through social regulation justice can be done to needs for freedom of expression and integrity and discipline. Social regulation would comprise three elements:

Firstly, self-regulatory mechanisms. Secondly, minimal legal requirements prescribed by the State in public interest. Thirdly, an active civil society. Forums representing high levels of media literacy, knowledge and experience on issues and social concerns. Viewpoints able to see totality of society's character, aspirations and thereby provide balancing and inspiring social regulation.

It is perhaps by this approach alone that media will help promote harmony, friendship and peace in S. Asia