[**Curbing media independence**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1648890/curbing-media-independence)

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THERE has been a lot of talk by government ministers and on social media about the menace of ‘fake news’ — a term for misinformation and disinformation popularised by former US president Trump to delegitimise media criticism against him — and how the near mysterious Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) proposal is the saviour we have all been waiting for so that Pakistanis can finally access authentic information. Does this assumption hold legitimacy?

The PMDA is also said to be the solution to all the problems faced by the Pakistani media — delayed salaries, wage determination, content moderation, etc but the supporters of this proposal, mostly only the proposers themselves as the proposed ordinance has been rejected by all major stakeholders including journalist bodies, bar councils, civil society groups, digital media collectives, etc are conveniently overlooking two major factors.

First, the state has played a major role in contributing to the financial crunch the media faces, as well as the dismal state of media freedom in the country. The state covertly stopped distribution of newspapers that merely reported events that took place in government meetings, had cable operators take television channels that were critical of state policies to the end of the channel list, and stopped advertising in these channels and newspapers that were critical, which undermined the right to information of readers and viewers of government messaging apart from leading to salary cuts only because the journalists chose to stick to reporting the truth rather than toeing the state’s line. Such acts created an environment where only media platforms willing to do public relations for the state have been able to function freely, with anchors even there feeling pressure to toe a certain line.

**Read**: [*This is the first govt that has left media completely independent, says PM Imran*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1648179)

Major opposition figures have been barred from appearing on television, and anchors that asked tough questions have lost their jobs one by one, in most cases their production crews going down with them as well. I have been asked by television producers to ‘please keep our jobs in mind’ when commenting on issues deemed unpleasant by the state, clearly pointing to the chilling effect all these acts have had on the media where self-censorship is now routine and jobs are held hostage.

The way forward lies in working with the media and accepting its responsibility and rights.

Second, the PMDA in its current form will cause further job insecurity in the media. When media organisations have to renew licences every year — much like how non-governmental organisations have had to do in the past few years — at the whim of a state-controlled regulator, they will constantly be navigating a thin line, walking on eggshells, and reflecting all other associated idioms that describe a media having a gun held to its head in the form of licence non-renewal, exorbitant fines or jail terms for violating government-mandated terms. The media organisations and their employees that choose to stay independent will have to suffer more.

Should the media be regulated by the very state that the media is supposed to hold accountable? The answer is a no-brainer, but state propaganda is washing logic away. A Grade 22 officer of the government has no business heading a ‘ministry of truth’, and should remain the figment of a fictional Orwellian state. The PMDA also will have its own tribunal that can only be appealed against at the Supreme Court, again creating hurdles in the way of due process, and lending an additional portfolio of arbitration of truth to the state-run regulator.

This brings us to the menace of ‘fake news’. Misinformation is often news that is inaccurate or false and shared without the intention to deceive. Disinformation, on the other hand, is information that is shared to deliberately deceive and mislead the public. Whereas the news media is of course given to errors, and disinformation can also be fed through it, the state is in no position to arbitrate the truth. The state has a strong information apparatus through which it can publicise its own version of matters, including on digital and social media.

More importantly, what will be the consequences of disinformation being shared by state officials and institutions? Branding citizens as traitors without any proof, spreading rumours about political opponents, deliberately delegitimising journalists and activists that report facts and hold the state accountable, and spreading propaganda. Even Fatima Jinnah was accused of being a ‘foreign agent’ by dictator Ayub Khan with no evidence in order to win an election, so such tactics are not new either. Not to forget ministers accusing opposition members of smuggling drugs, claiming there are videos, but never making them public. Will there ever be accountability for such excesses and partisan propaganda?

The way forward rests in working with the media and accepting its responsibility and rights provided by the Constitution. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, the All Pakistan Newspaper Society, the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, the Pakistan Broadcasters Association and the Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors have put up a united front rejecting the PMDA, [held a protest outside parliament](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646173) during the president’s address to a joint sitting, and the government is now holding consultations with a range of stakeholders on the PMDA.

What was the purpose of the information ministry in creating such a hullabaloo? Why does the government not consult stakeholders first, like the human rights ministry did for the journalists’ protection bill when it comes to these regulatory proposals? And will the consultations take the feedback into account, or will it be another eyewash to borrow legitimacy and then go ahead with what was decided before? Neither is going to be easy, but the state must make apparent its desire to protect the media and work with it to strengthen accountability in Pakistan rather than just protect its own reputation.

Media groups are fully capable of strengthening their own code of conduct for fact-checking, and for regulating rights and wages of their workers which is of utmost importance. If they do not act, the state may abuse this loophole to occupy further space as it is attempting to right now.

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*Published in Dawn, September 28th, 2021*