

Mass Media - News

News credibility

By Hajrah Mumtaz

TRADITIONAL media outlets in Pakistan may dream of a time when they'll be able to set up offices in major cities around the world, and thus generate their own international reports; but that time is likely to be some way away. The sort of resources available to local journalistic centres, and the scale at which they operate, means that the best even the largest among them can do is have correspondents - or maybe a small office - at a few international hubs, often London or New York/Washington, maybe Brussels or Geneva. Sometimes reporters are sent on special trips for special coverage, such as to important conferences; but on the whole, Pakistan's media outlets simply do not have the sort of resources commanded by the BBC, say, or The New York Times, that allow them to station correspondents and offices in multiple parts of the world.

That may change, though - and not in the sense of Pakistan's newspapers and television channels catching up, but of larger organisations falling behind. Various factors, including the economic recession and the internet, are leading

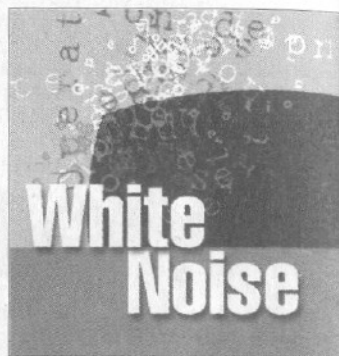
to downsizing in many media outlets across primarily North America but also Europe. Newsrooms are axing staff, and the people losing jobs are not just the copyeditors but also, significantly, reporters. If the trend does not reverse, it may be that some years in the future, the current giants of the field will find themselves unable to divert resources to sustain multiple off-shore cells.

That, if it happens, will be a hard fall for the giants; but it'll hardly be unprecedented. In many countries across the world, including Pakistan, much of the international and even some local news stories - depending on the scale of the organisation's reporting staff - routinely come from newsgathering agencies such as The Associated Press or Reuters. In fact, going through your favourite newspaper's bylines and story credits will give you a good idea of the scale of its reporting staff, and the newspaper's priorities. And so far, at least here in Pakistan, that has never really been a problem.

In the US and Europe, however, a few voices have started linking shrinking newsrooms with poor news credibility. The fear is that as media organisations face diminish-

ed staff strength, they will have to pick up more and more material from outside sources; this will create the demand for organisations that disseminate news to the outlets. The question is, therefore, how far it will be possible to prevent news from being planted and who will check that the newsgathering organisation is entirely above board and without bias. In other words, as Richard Perez-Pena put it in a recent article in The International Herald Tribune, "News comes from more and more outlets about which readers know less and less."

In his article "As news sources multiply, so do credibility risks," Perez-Pena acknowledges that publishers and broadcasters have always called on freelance journalists. "But a generation ago, if they used material from another organisation, it was usually limited to a handful of large, well-known and respected ones like The Associated Press and Reuters," he writes. "With established newsrooms shrinking, many smaller news outlets have cropped up in the past few years, selling or simply giving news reports to the traditional media - groups like ProPublica, Global-Post, Politico and Kaiser



Health News."

So, declining resources will force the traditional news media to outsource; yet those same declining resources could simultaneously hamper them from being utterly diligent about the news provider's background and links.

Perez-Pena uses the example of an article published recently by The Washington Post, which was provided by a newly-formed news organisation called The Fiscal Times. The article was about the debate over federal spending and the newspaper did not disclose that The Fiscal Times' financial backer was Peter G. Peterson, who has "an abiding interest in the [federal spending] issue and ties

and risks

to experts cited in the article.”

A more shocking example provided by Mr Perez-Pena occurred in 2004, “when the Bush administration produced a video that looked like a news report in support of its proposed changes to Medicare, and dozens of stations around the country included it in their newscasts.”

To any media analyst, this would be the equivalent of the government planting news and the news outlets knowingly or unknowingly being complicit in duping the public.

The writer quotes several media analysts and executives as saying that this sort of major lapse is unlikely to be repeated in the current situation, “but the risk is real. Inevitably, they said, there will be groups or individuals with particular slants offering to fill the reporting gaps for traditional news organisations – and the more of them there are, the harder it will be to perceive their agendas.”

“But none of the risks posed by out-sourcing is entirely new,” writes Perez-Pena. “As for using less-than-objective work from outside sources, ‘there are a lot of newspapers that essentially take press releases and put them in the

paper,’” he quotes a media consultant as saying. “For generations, owners who have little or no need to answer to shareholders have used their newspapers to pursue their political aims – most famously, the early 20th century press barons like William Randolph Hearst, Robert R. McCormick and Harrison Gray Otis. In fact, more diffuse media ownership did not become the norm until the late 20th century.”

For Pakistan, outsourcing to non-established newsgathering organisations is not yet a problem, and probably will not be for some time. Here, the dominant traditional media usually have their own reporting staff to cover local and national news. And stories that are picked up from the agencies, be they international stories or local, come from well-established organisations.

There is another way in which the issue of news credibility crops up, however, and that lies in the influence and biases of the owners of news organisations, and their political links. Media and politics have become intertwined in the past decade: in terms of some media outlets, both print and broadcast, a consistent stance for or

against a certain government, or political party, or leader, or even an issue, can clearly be identified. Matters are not helped by rumours that journalists have or can be bought, or not, or put in planted stories, or end up presenting as ‘objective’ news material that is little more than an official press release.

It is a thorny situation because who is to say whether a consistent stance for or against an issue, say, is the result of an owner or editor’s bias (and therefore unethical) or an objective media campaign (which is fine). And, absolute objectivity is in any case the journalist’s unachievable dream. One can only assume that the journalists and the media organisations are doing the best they can under the circumstances, until solid evidence becomes available to the contrary.

Nevertheless, it behoves news consumers to be aware of these issues and to dwell upon the credibility of news reports in the context of what they are aware of in terms of the journalist or organisation. It behoves news consumers to connect the dots wherever possible.

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