

Pakistan in the new information order

Mass communication

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As we step forward into the challenges of the next millennium, one of its most vital aspects of modern living will be the availability of up-to-the-minute knowledge of world events. In this context, the Internet is already playing a major role in bridging the gap between nations and bringing the world closer together—literally turning it into a “global village” despite geographical limitations.

Developing countries such as Pakistan are getting the best of both worlds: we can access the Internet to learn about the latest innovations in various fields of interest around the world; and, in turn, project our own unique social, cultural, political and religious values through our own websites. In the field of news coverage, however, we still have a long way to go. Although news agencies try to present a fair potpourri of global news distribution, attention still needs to be paid to Pakistan in particular, because of its importance in the comity of nations.

There are a few reasons for this apparent neglect. Although many people who read newspapers or access the Internet may have heard of a particular European or American city, the majority are not intimately familiar with that concerned area. To put it bluntly, it does not affect their lives, so why should they need to know about it? That is a very legitimate query from the consumer's point of view. But the point is, the consumer cannot choose to remain isolated and aloof from the world anymore. Global warming, for example, threatens all of us with its potential to harm all earthly existence. >

The decisions made in the Kyoto conference in Japan will affect each and every one of us because our governments will do their best to implement those decisions. El Nino changes not only the weather in Europe, and causes heavy snow in Colorado, but bush fires in Indonesia, haze in Malaysia, and floods in Guam as well. We cannot choose to remain ignorant anymore.

The satellite-dish revolution has also had a negative impact on Pakistan's standing in the world. Because of restrictions placed on us by our religion and culture, the insidious influence of this form of media can also be felt by newspaper consumers. So many channels offer the latest news coverage that many Pakistanis tune in to those channels rather than their own. Also, disillusionment about our own particular form of news coverage and presentation has set in. People do not

because TV has just provided them with a faster medium of gaining knowledge without too much effort on their part. There is no novelty in picking up a newspaper anymore; there is no incentive.

Recently, Pakistan received a lot of attention over developments within the country. But does Pakistan deserve the world's attention only when something negative to its image takes place?

Unfortunately, our own print media has played a major role in building up Pakistan's image as a trouble-spot. Some aspects of that image are not within our control. But the media can do a lot within its power to change that image. News websites can focus more on the positive aspects of our society and culture rather than its sordid

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side alone. We should try to project our newspapers as a forum for global news presentation rather than always living in the past and lamenting about our own sorry state of affairs all the time. People don't pick up newspapers anymore because they can now predict quite accurately that there is nothing different worth reading in them now. Although the majority of the population may not find global news of any significance to their personal lives, they can't choose to ignore it for long; because all of us are more closer together now than we ever were at any stage of our evolution.

People are also experiencing a “knowledge burnout” because so much knowledge and information is being thrust upon us from different directions. But just as we can improve the quality of our channels by extracting the good aspects and discarding the harmful influences; so can we make extra efforts to project the world's point of view in our own local newspapers, thereby increasing our understanding and tolerance about those whose lives are different from our own. By building a more positive image of Pakistan, we may be sure to

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Radio Pakistan

Sabih Mohsin

Today, December 20, Radio Pakistan completes 25 years as a statutory corporation. But a quarter century of its existence as a corporation has not helped a bit in improving its performance as a government department. On the contrary, in areas such as credibility and freedom of presenting an opposite view, its rating has gone down further.

In 1965, the government appointed a broadcasting committee to examine the state of broadcasting in Pakistan and to make recommendations regarding its growth. After a lengthy investigation, the committee found that radio was unable to play its role fully because its working was hampered by bureaucratic control, particularly in "matters of financial sanctions and recruitment of personnel".

The committee, "after careful consideration", pointed out in its report submitted to the government in 1967, that if Radio Pakistan was to fulfil effectively the basic objectives of providing education, information and entertainment, it cannot be run as just another department of the government. Consequently, Radio Pakistan was made a corporation on December 20, 1972.

Since then it has functioned as just another government department because all the significant clauses of the PBC Act begin or end with the words "as instructed by the government from time to time". The corporation has also failed to achieve the financial and administrative independence, so much valued by the committee, because even after a period of 25 years of its corporate existence, the PBC has not yet been able to generate its own financial resources and has to depend almost entirely on government grants.

In the earlier years, Radio Pakistan did not have to face the problem of credibility much. Perhaps one reason was that then it did very little to jeopardise its credibility. Another was that in those days alternative sources of information which could expose any attempt on the part of the radio to misguide its listeners were not available. Then, the indigenous print media was not as

now; the foreign broadcasting organisations were not as keen to report and comment upon the internal affairs of Pakistan as they do these days.

It was comfortable sailing for Radio Pakistan as far as credibility of its news bulletins was con-

able" parts of her talk.

However, during the later years, the need to cut off a line or to edit a recording to expunge undesirable expression of opinion seldom arose. The radiomen knew whom to invite in their discussion programmes. Over the years, while the PPP and the PML have played musical chairs in the PM Secretariat, radiomen have constituted two sets of talkers. One is booked while the PPP is in office, keeping the other completely out of the radio's studios. When the PML takes over, the first set of talkers goes out making room for the other. In this way, the radio listener always gets a one-sided view: the one which suits the government of the day.

Nevertheless, there were some very brief periods, brought about either by fluke or by design, during which Radio Pakistan was allowed to function according to professional requirements. When General Ziaul Haq took over, he in his enthusiasm to project his own image as that of a liberal and enlightened person asked the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation to act independently with regard to its news coverage "just like the BBC". The naive in the PBC's newsroom took the General's words at face value and started preparing their bulletins accordingly.

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Only a few days later, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, released temporarily from detention, received a tumultuous reception at Lahore. Radio Pakistan reported the event according to its newly-acquired freedom. And that dropped the curtain on its short-lived independence in news reporting.

Again, during the first Benazir government, when Javed Jabbar was minister of state for information and broadcasting, and Aslam Azhar was chairman PBC and PWT,

started cracking under the pressure of the long dictatorship of President Ayub Khan. It received severe dents during the 1971 war when Radio Pakistan indulged in gross mis-reporting of facts.

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As far as freedom of expression is concerned Radio Pakistan's record is not unblemished. As early as in 1950, an ugly incident took place which confirms this.

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Mohtarama Fatima Jinnah was scheduled to broadcast a radio talk on the occasion of the birth anniversary of the Quaid-e-Azam. According to the usual practice, a copy of the script was sent in advance to the radio authorities. After going through it they found two of her remarks to be critical of the then government. The radio authorities requested the Mohtarma to exclude the remarks which she, naturally, refused to do.

Later, during the actual broadcast, there occurred two long pauses. An official hand-out explained that the pauses had been caused by breakdowns of transmitters. However, there was a big furore in the press against Z.A. Bokhari, the then director-general of Radio Pakistan.

"Mr Bokhari's transmitters are very obliging. They tripped at the right moments," wrote one newspaper. The truth was that the line to the transmitters had been deliberately cut off when the Mohtarma reached the "objection-

ures. Since the two men were liberal-minded, a formula was devised according to which all the political parties, including those in the opposition, were to be given time on the electronic media in proportion to their representations in Parliament. The opposition could thus get ample opportunity to express its views on radio and television.

But members of the ruling party could not tolerate the 'violation' of what they considered to be their right to the exclusive use of government-controlled media. Consequently, Javed Jabbar was shunted out to the politically less important Ministry of Science and Technology, while Aslam Azhar lost his job once again. The status of freedom of expression on radio reverted to the status quo ante.

During the second Benazir government, radio's credibility and its respect for freedom of expression slid to the lowest point. The activities of the leader of the opposition and his party were not covered at all. It was only during the last days of that government, and that too under pressure from various quarters, that the recording of a speech delivered by the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly was presented on radio and TV. Throughout that period, very unreal pictures of the unfortunate happenings in Karachi and of the country's economy were projected in radio's current affairs programmes.

During the present government's tenure, there has been a slight improvement. Not only are the leader of the opposition's statements being reported — even though briefly — the meetings of the opposition party's executive committee and other activities have also been covered. However, one-sided views continue to be projected in the current affairs programmes. According to press reports, former president Farooq Leghari was denied the opportunity to address the nation on the electronic media before tendering his resignation.

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The writer is a former director programme, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation.