

Reforming the n

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BENAZIR'S CONCERNS and objections on the private sector's news media, particularly the daily newspapers, may be valid. Comments and analyses of the press can be expected to be based on incomplete evaluation and occasionally on flawed logic. It is no secret that the standard of journalism is not very high. But then in Pakistan, the standards are low, including the standard of governance. Yet, press in Pakistan may be suffering with excessive problems: interruptions to its freedom due to bad governance; semi-educated and unaware readers due to bad governance; lack of access to information due to bad governance; inability to paralyse misleading reporting due to bad governance; etc. A less-than-satisfactory news media have everything to do with bad governance in the country. Now, do the news media qualify for government's support and help? It can be argued that the newspaper industry qualifies for government's assistance on two grounds: compensation for past neglect and cost-effectiveness of assistance.

Despite limited readership, the press plays a very significant role. Concepts presented in the daily newspapers are taken up by magazines, TV programmes, debates, private discussions, etc. Opinions of the newspapers trickle down to the uneducated.

In Pakistan, the role of the press is even more significant for the following main reasons.

The urgency

In Pakistan, a healthy and flourishing press is the need of the hour. It can keep the system from collapsing.

Today, checks and balances are collapsing in the political system, judiciary, bureaucracy, etc. A responsible, visionary, and wise news media will attempt to reform every institution in the country — their weaknesses and limitations will be exposed, an intellectual debate on ways of reforming will be initiated, due pressure to take appropriate actions will be applied. Government would also be more inclined to release information unafraid of misinterpretation.

Considering the rising violence, ethnicity, sectarianism, impoliteness, the news media can play a major role in keeping the nation on the right track, which is a concern today. Better news analysis

will result in better perspective of the people — a solution to all problems in a democracy. Healthy trends will be encouraged and unhealthy discouraged. Even raising the literacy rate is not going to be as effective in refining the perspective of the people.

The forces of destruction are strong in the country. The weaknesses of the system are being exploited with ruthlessness — in the shape of terrorism, division of people, corruption, drug trafficking, exploiting religious sentiments, etc. It is believed that more than one 'hidden hand' is working to destabilise the country. Democracy in its infancy is very difficult to sustain amid such forces of destruction. The news media can make the job easier.

Business outlook

The viability of newspaper industry is dictated by the following two characteristics. First, the newspapers have meager resources for its operations. Because of widespread illiteracy and poverty, the newspapers have limited readership. Limited readership translates into limited finances. The overall readership in the country is not sufficient to sustain a healthy news media.

Second, the newspapers can get by with mediocre reporting and analysis. The readers, because of their lack of awareness, cannot always decipher between good and bad analysis. Therefore, a newspaper's effort to improve the standard of journalism is often not rewarded in monetary terms. Other strategies, such as sensationalising news, maintaining pleasing presentation by adding colour and more pages, are usually more rewarding than superior journalism. But, business ethics contain the tendency of excessively resorting to such unprofessional strategies.

The press in Pakistan is constrained with the above-mentioned limitations. The result is that newspapers can sacrifice quality and still survive financially. Printing a daily newspaper is feasible with minimal resources — experts need not provide the 'expert' opinions, fact-finding and investigative reporting may be curtailed, grammatical mistakes may be ignored in the less-conspicuous sections, etc. All newspapers have to sacrifice quality to survive.

When some newspapers can survive with minimal expenditure, all competing newspapers have to harness their expenses.

This scenario is further aggravated by the fact that only an insignificant number of readers demand quality journalism. Also, the government advertising, which is a major source of income for these businesses, is quite independent of the quality of the newspapers, and gets distributed fairly evenly and, therefore, gives little incentive for quality reporting.

The newspapers operate with meager resources. Yet, they are doing a tremendous job. Even the government, which is highly critical of the press, has not been able to raise many serious and specific criticisms to undermine the role of the media. Press is always susceptible to criticism. Yet, it has not been ridiculed so far. In contrast, almost every other institution in the country has been ridiculed. Financial constraints have forced the press to take on limited tasks and challenges for itself. Yet, within the limited realm, the industry has fared reasonably well. At the same time, it needs to be confessed that the news medium has vast unexplored domain.

Apparently, many checks and balances are working effectively on the industry. Businesses in Pakistan are always trying to get favours from the government, but the newspaper industry seems to be an exception. It openly criticises the government, individual leaders and individual departments. The press does not discriminate in its criticism. The present government is displeased with the press. This speaks volumes for the integrity of individual journalists and newspaper owners. Of course, news media always has some consideration for the powerful and the authority, which is perfectly acceptable.

The government does not question the sincerity of the criticism made by the newspapers, but its inadequacies. Most of the inadequacies of the industry can be attributed to limited funds due to minimal readership and not ineffective checks and balances. This implies that checks and balances are working reasonably well on the industry. This is quite assuring for the health of the industry. Limited finances are keeping the press from exploring its vast potential.

Proposed policy

It is important to visualise the impact of government subsidy for the newspaper industry. How would the industry spend addi-

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tional finances? Of course, that depends on how the additional funding is provided — the incentives it creates.

Government subsidy can help the press in two ways: it can provide the necessary resources for adequate functioning of the industry and it can create incentives for quality journalism. Imagine what a mere billion rupees of government subsidy, granted in small chunks and creating incentives for quality reporting and analysis, would do to the news media within one year. Also, the subsidy can be gradually increased in the next few years. And once the limitations mentioned earlier, that are causing low quality journalism cease to exist, the subsidy can be gradually reduced.

Following, is a proposed manner in which the subsidy may be introduced. A committee must be formed that would review the daily newspapers. Directors of the committee should be nominated by the various interest groups in the country such as business community, lawyers, women, provinces, assemblies, government, foreign office, etc. The committee should be handsomely funded and best people must be attracted for evaluating news reports and analysis. The directors will naturally determine, within a framework, how the subsidy will be granted.

The newspapers would have to be evaluated for their contents everyday. Most comprehensive coverage and most balanced analysis on all issues should receive monetary rewards. Similarly, investigative reports unveiling news should be rewarded. At the same time, unsubstantiated news and analysis should be penalized and fined. Initially these fines should be very nominal so that the newspapers do not lose most of their contents in the fear of being penalized. At the end of each month the net payment would be made to the various newspapers.

In an attempt to take a chunk out of government subsidy, a large number of newspapers will tend to emerge. This is not a desirable effect. Instead, the government subsidy must be such that only the best newspapers remain financially feasible. This objective can be achieved by granting subsidy to those newspapers that fare better in a particular month. Therefore, at the end of every month, only the 'best' few newspapers would receive government subsidy.

It may be noted that all subsidy would be directed to the businesses that own the newspapers

and not the individual journalists. Free market forces would then determine how the subsidy is distributed within organisation.

Many West European governments, such as Denmark and Norway, keep a very close watch on their news media and maintain comprehensive checks to keep them from drifting. In the same way, Pakistan needs to introduce checks and balances for ensuring a flourishing news media.

The impact

Imagine what investigative reporters would be willing to unveil to get their share of the subsidy. Imagine how balanced and accurate news reports would become; how prompt and comprehensive news analysis would become; how perceptive new columns would become. Imagine how relatively plausible solutions to the country's problems would come to the fore, when expert and experienced people will be attracted to the profession. Imagine...

An effort to reform the new media is likely to be successful for the following reasons. (a) It is in the hands of private businesses which compete with each other in a fair manner, and tend to invest in the right direction. (b) It is the only industry that has incentives to disclose information accurately. (c) It is the only industry that cannot be dictated by the government authorities even if it is dependent on government subsidy. (d) It is an industry that has by and large maintained ethical business and professional practices.

Even if government regulations fall short of providing an equitable distribution of the subsidy, the finances will end up with the newspaper industry. The inadequacies due to insufficient resources are bound to be removed.

It can be argued that out of the non-compulsory funds of the government, money spent on the press may be the most beneficial disbursement — more beneficial than spending the amount on SAP, highways, debt retirement, etc. In any case, the government can partially compensate the nation for its past neglect towards human development and institutional collapse by providing a healthy news media. In this age of information when access to useful information is cheaper than ever, investment in the news media is bound to bring results.