

The designs on the press

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Mass Comm

THE press is a bit like the poor man's attractive wife. Everyone around keeps eyeing it, expresses his views about it, and yearns to meddle with it. The government more greedily than others.

Islamabad has just brought its designs — or the first part of them — out into the open. These are remarkable for their stuffiness. The objective, it is claimed, is to improve standards. In fact though there is not an honest imaginative word in the 12 pages of its do's and don'ts about how this is going to be done.

It is as if what had been holding down standards were immorality and obscenity, vulgar and derogatory expressions, false and malicious allegations, glamorization of crimes, incitement to violence, attacks on the reputation and integrity of individuals, unfair and non-objective news items and comments, and so on. All that was needed therefore was to slap a body of prohibitions, set up a complaints council, prescribe punishments and, whoosh, the standards would go spiralling up.

First, if these clever ones believed in their code, shouldn't they have started with applying it to the part of the media that was directly and fully under their control? The radio and television, as it happens, stand exempt from these constraints. They will not be accountable to the press council and no public complaint against them will lie there. Apparently their standards do not need to be raised.

If the argument is that there is already a separate code for the electronic media then, surely, the people who are content with that and think that that is good enough for these media are barely qualified to write one for the independent press. Radio and television cannot only on any independent assessment be faulted on points of ethics, they can even arguably be accused of something akin to professional conmanship for passing as news much of what is strictly not that.

And if the claim is that the electronic media are already answerable to the parliament through the government, then, the print media are responsible to the even higher body, the people themselves or the sections of them that constitute each paper's readership.

As for the drawing up of this code, the ministry of information seems to have done very little thinking of its own in the twelve months or so that it had been

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The problem however is really of motive and content, not of the press not being in need of some rules for itself. The history of its relative freedom is not a long one and even the traditions of professionalism that abide face assaults from the forces of the market. If the newer brood of publications and pressmen are not helped by their peers and seniors to recognize the strength or validity of the first they cannot be much faulted for yielding to the pressures and temptations of the second.

It is significant that during the past year there were repeated instances of public protests against the press. The PMA in Rawalpindi launched a banner campaign against what it called yellow journalism. Doctors in the General Hospital of that city locked up several press photographers and snatched their cameras for taking pictures of a political worker's dead body. A doctor in Attock distributed handbills calling journalists blackmailers and then went on a hunger strike to emphasise the point. Teachers of a girls college in Islamabad demonstrated against what they saw as the press' malicious vilification of the college principal. Even a ruling party MNA moved a privilege motion in the house complaining of blackmailing by a newspaper which, he said, was 'notorious for scandals.'

The basics of professionalism do, it seems, need to be saved from the melee of the competition — which is likely to get even fiercer — for circulation and advertising, official goodwill and ingratiation in select quarters and interest groups. Apparently, a system has to be insinuated within the profession to promote the essential norms and ensure retribution for lapses.

The drive for this will have in large part to come from the bigger publications and the senior members of the profession. The government can participate in the effort but mostly to the extent of offering its input.

It can indeed make a contribu-

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document is now more of a
rigueur. It humours the mullah. It
keeps the rulers on the right side of
their principal constituency.

There could be a further purpose. A supposedly Islamic agenda
is to be in works. It must
be in the light of on the
had served the
once, another
is successors
technology incorporated
press will have to be
in respect in how it
responds to the unfolding of this
agenda.

The prohibition against publishing
anything that will bring a
friendly government or head of a
friendly state into contempt or
hatred would seem antediluvian in
this age of democracy and free
press and in these days of well-published
sex scandals and personal
corruption in the highest places in
powerful countries. Not so, it
seems, in this country.

And can you always keep genuine
criticism becoming an inducement
to contempt? Any civilized
opinion about Taliban's treatment
of their women, for instance, is
bound to teeter over that thin
notional line dividing the two.

Some of the other innovations of
the draft code seem like exercises
in special pleading or bids to cover
one's flanks. Warning the press
against publishing anything that
jeopardizes the country's foreign
relations, or asking it not to involve
the defence forces in politics or to
make only fair comments on their
performance or conduct seem
much like a redundancy just to
show off an ardour.

parency and ease of verifying
news more and more pervasive
that the room for sensation
and blackmail is drastically
rowed down.

A beginning should be
bringing in the long-term
dom of information act
guarantee the press pro
easy access to almost any
document.

Secondly, government should
progressively liquidate compo
sions that make newspapers com
pete through other means than pro
fessional merit. Official adverti
ing, allocation of newsprint, audi
ing of circulation, selections for fo
eign tours etc should all be unde
strictly professional and indepe
dent auspices or decided on the
basis of professionally determined
and independently verifiable fo
mulae.

Finally, there is rarely a great
compulsion towards excellence
than a model of excellence. The
government ought to set the me
under its control on a course th
will enable them, at least in t
news and current affairs sectors,
begin to become competitive ev
for the best of newspapers.

It is possible to do that, and there
are obvious ways of starting the
process. The status quo provides
false comfort to the rulers. It does
no more good to a political govern
ment than it did to military dicta
torships. The government's avowed
desire to raise newspaper stan
dards will be tested by measures
such as these. It will not be proved
by the sheafs of flapdoodle it has
just produced.