

At a time in history when the total quantum of information generated by research and all the diverse sectors of human activity and ingenuity is estimated to be doubling every five years, the need to empower the people of Pakistan with information and knowledge becomes a fundamental requirement for meaningful survival and authentic progress. Pakistan has inherited an official system and attitudes that treat information in general and information about the state and government in particular as exclusive preserves of official Establishment. This conventional control of information prevents the people at large from learning about why and how and by whom critical decisions are taken that affect their lives and the future of our nation.

The Fourth Estate in Pakistan has made an outstanding contribution to the strengthening of democratic values and freedom of expression. Under the overt suppression of martial law as well as the covert coercion of civilian rule, the Press has made noble sacrifices of life, limb, liberty and revenue to uphold the fundamental right to report without fear or favour. In a country where the electronic media of radio and television offer only a government controlled version of news and opinion, the Press is the sole source of credible information on the wide range of socio-political, economic and general developments in Pakistan and the world. Despite the fact that the Press since 1988 under a relatively

The information revolution

Whereas other developing countries allow private radio/TV channels to operate, our electronic media is largely restricted to government monopolies, says ASAD RAHMAN

liberal law, which in the form of a frequently re-promulgated Ordinance is presently in a lapsed state, the Press continues to be subject to explicit as well as subtle pressures by the government in office at any given time. The issuance of permits for newsprint import quotas, certification and the placement of government advertising are all subject to official control. Other methods being employed include the taxation departments with tax demands and threats of arrest.

Over the past ten years, freedom of the Press has also spawned license and excess in which some disinformation and defamation find easy space. Without aiming to curb the right to write and publish, effective self-regulation is still being evolved. Yellow journalism is not only rampant in Pakistan but all over the world, even in the developed Western nations. There, a code of ethics, conduct and censure are in the ambit of independent bodies of working journalists and editors. Libel laws are powerful enough to check and punish any proven transgressions in a court of

law. That is the spirit that the Pakistani government should be looking to bring into its relations with the Fourth Estate. The positive aspect emerging from relations between the Executive and the Press is the formation of Committees for the Freedom of the Press in all major centres of journalistic activity.

Their demands call for the abolition of the Ministry of Information, distribution of government advertising on an independent merit basis, abolition of government control on the import of newsprint and that radio and television be freed of government control. The development of a responsible and free Press and electronic media in Pakistan will go a long way in helping the government in economic and socio-political development of the country. Internationally independent and free information technology and the Press are playing a leading role in the development of programmes for education, health, economics, environment issues and social awareness of development issues.

These Committees must also play a

responsible role in consultation with the government to enact libel laws, a code of conduct and ethics to deter yellow journalism from entering the arena of Pakistan's journalistic activity. These Committees would have to play the role of a monitoring body on the commercial activities of the journalists. Journalists' minimum wages have been detrimental to the development of responsible journalism in Pakistan and led to the 'Lifafa culture'. Radio, for a period of 50 years, and TV for a period of 30 years have remained a state monopoly, particularly in news bulletins, political programmes and current affairs.

Whereas other developing countries including Muslim nations such as Indonesia and Turkey, enable several hundreds of private radio stations and dozens of private TV channels to operate within the framework of laws that ensure responsibility and due care in programme content and where viability is determined by market forces, radio and TV in Pakistan are restricted to government monopolies and private monopolies. In 1990, a private

monopoly was created to provide all programming and advertising to a government controlled TV channel (STN). In 1995-96, monopolies in FM radio were created and continue to operate without hindrance. In 1996, a new private monopoly was created for a cable TV channel. It is creditable that, despite the straitjacket of official control, radio and TV in Pakistan have rendered some notable contributions in fostering talent, in training hundreds of individuals in technical and programme disciplines, and in broadcasting material of relevance to the country's development needs. In sports, music and entertainment as well, the two media have occasionally excelled.

However, with the advent of satellite media and proliferation of choices, the vices of official control and unbridled profiteering have become pronounced and obvious. Excessive bureaucratisation and continued politicalisation have significantly reduced quality and audience size. Attempts to revitalise PTV are largely cosmetic while PBC remains badly neglected. One of the most potentially powerful means of building a well-informed society within, and projecting a dynamic message externally, remains underutilised and unfocused. The progressive law promulgated by the caretaker government in 1997 known as the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance 1997 has been allowed to lapse, thus preventing the advent of a pluralist and participative electronic media sector in the country.

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