**What s news what isn t**

BY A B B A S N A S I R 2020-12-06

IN the post-Trump world, whether in the US, Brazil, India or Pakistan, what makes news depends on who is peddling it, and, in the black-and-white polarised worlds we have now created, one can predict with near-certainty who will believe it.

All else is not considered news, regardless of merit. If this were true only for those taking partisan positions or playing an active part in politics it was one thing, but tragically, the bulk of the media has jumped on this bandwagon too. And happily, it seems. The exceptions are few and far between.

The most widely prevalent argument on the airwaves, digital platforms and in newsprint belongs to the one that wields coercive control over the media.

Such sustained coercive pressure, one can be certain, leads to the Stockholm syndrome kicking in.

What else would explain the conduct of some in the media who do all the distasteful things they presumably have to, with such relish? There are no credible polls to say if the most widely pushed view is the most widely believed one too.

In any case, anyone who wishes to consume `news` based on the `what is newsworthy` criterion, is left feeling shortchanged. You will obviously expect me to cite facts and I will. Let`s start with an interview of former finance minister Ishaq Dar on BBC Hardtalk which was aired this week.

Without going into the merits of whether he should have agreed to the interview or what he said and did not say or what he seemed comfortable with or what made him uncomfortable, let me say that HardTalk dominated flagship current affairs programmes in Pakistan for at least three days.

In the normal course, Ishaq Dar`s words and images can`t be showed on television as the regulator PTA has banned him, following his non-appearance in courts and being declared an `absconder` But the powers that be adjudged his BBC interview as damaging to the opposition. So, excerpts were widely aired by TV outlets and adorned columns of established columnists. Mind you, nobody aired the whole interview which may have shown Mr Dar in a slightly more favourable light than did the few clips that generated programmes and headlines.

It was clear where the impetus was coming from.

Addressing the oath-taking ceremony of the GilgitBaltistan chief minister, the prime minister men-tioned the interview in the context of his crusade against `chor, daku` (thieves, robbers) in the opposition ranks.

The prime minister`s point man on Covid-19 but who also chairs Karachi development meetings flanked by the `same page` DG ISI and Karachi`s military brass, headed by the corps commander also found time to research and tweet what he believed was an incorrect claim by Dar regarding the 2018 election opinion polls.

If the prime minister and some of his ministers, who have other responsibilities, were dwelling on the interview how could the federal and provincialPTI information czars be left behind? Apart from collectively taking up hours discussing the interview on TV channels, their words generated several column lengths of copy in the papers too.

Let`s now look at how some other interviews were covered by mainstream media. When the BBC`s Mishal Husain asked the prime minister his views on China`s treatment of the Uighurs; he said he `didn`t know much` about the issue. Yes, a burning issue that has been in the global news for months. No headlines here.

More recently, when Express TV`s Mansoor Ali Khan asl(ed the prime minister about the kidnapping of journalist Matiullah Jan and a couple of others, Mr Imran Khan said he was not aware of their cases. But he added that when Mr Jan was taken away he did `raise` the issue and the journalist was released by the evening.

When asked who had taken Matiullah Jan and the others, the man in charge of the country and our liberties, shifted uncomfortably in his chairand said he tasked the Ministry of Interior with the inquiry. They would know. Of course, this made no headlines or current affairs programmes.

Fewer headlines than the `Dar demolition` by HardTall( which, as things stand was largely inconsequential, were created of the news that the ministry concerned had made a hash of ordering LNG in a timely manner and cost the exchequer in excess of $200 million.

No headline or discussion could have been expected of the ill-advised move of asking the DG ISI to coordinate and collate the work of all, including the civilian, intelligence agencies rather than an independent, high-powered director or supervisor of intelligence as is the norm elsewhere. The pitfalls of the reported move are the subject matter of a separate column.

Sherbaz Mazari: As I was finishing this column, the sad news was breaking of Baloch politician Sardar Sherbaz Mazari`s passing. Mazari Sahib was a principled politician, a polite individual who I had the honour of meeting during my reporting days in Karachi.

He had vision. Let me recall some of his words published on the front page of Dawn on Aug 29, 2006, after the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti in a Special Forces operation in Dera Bugti. He warned the authorities they would face a tremendous backlash at the 80-year-old politician`s killing who`d already been incapacitated by a muscle-wasting disease.

`My message to Musharraf is this: General, you have finally managed to kill the man you wanted.

Now, if you possess an honourable bone in your body, do the decent thing and hand the body of Nawab Bugti to his family members. The least my dear friend Akbar Bugti deserves is the dignity of a properfuneraland aßnalrestingplacein the land he loved enough to give his life for.

Sardar Mazari`s plea fell on deaf ears. Fourteen years later we still blame everyone but ourselves for the militancy and the security challenges in Balochistan, when we ourselves presented on a silver platter a situation ripe to be exploited to any/ all takers. The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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