

The development of information technology has far reaching implications for the future of civilisation and power structures at the national and international level. In the past attempts have been made through legislation, and sometimes through overt and covert coercion, to control, channel and influence its sale and use. Communications media, particularly transnational communications media which now contribute software to national systems and also influence the development of indigenous software, have a broad outreach with direct impact on public opinion and consumption patterns. At the same time, less well known, new and practical applications of information technology have appeared on the scene. Access to these has already altered the balance of power in many fields, including defence and strategic planning.

The creation, or manipulation through media, of public opinion on a broad range of issues through obvious propaganda and the projection of personalities that are chosen for positions of power by national and international power brokers, has become a subject of discussion: more and more of those carefully built up through decades of slick media campaigns turn out to have feet of clay or fail as political leaders when the opportunity is handed to them. Growing public awareness that such media agendas exist tends to deprive them of the desired impact, which is just as well.

Dialogues have been initiated in an attempt to determine whether national or transnational communications media operators actually have a strategic agenda or merely respond to events. A review of occasions on which there were differences of opinion between state policy and media reaction to an issue reveal that a complex relationship exists. There is a degree of power sharing on issues of control and regulation, but real power to set and implement policy, when they choose to exercise it, rests with governments. At the international level, Bosnia is considered a case in point where US media and the United States government differed and the US government was not swayed by public opinion and media coverage for several years. Nevertheless, the belief that media activity can influence international policy and influence world opinion leads to the cooption of media practitioners by power elites in developing countries from time to time.

There are unanswered questions about the degree to which the Press, or other private sector media, can work in tandem with the establishment while remaining independent. This is often done in order to manipulate public opinion or create issues to achieve specific political objectives that may or may not be in the public interest. The public has the

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right to access a broad range of information and analyses and draw its own conclusions. Fortunately, the availability of alternative national and international channels of information makes expensive one of the few factors limiting access to information these days. The establishment of alternate, private sector radio and television channels must be considered in this context. Similarly, the call to establish an authority to monitor the granting of licenses to the private sector must also be considered with this fact in mind.

For new media organisations there is always a potential audience, which could consist of hundreds, thousands, millions or hundreds of millions, depending on the ability to divert attention from existing practitioners as well as the outreach of new organisations or the readership and distribution network of various print media. Various public and private sector organisations compete for a portion of the viewing and reading time of audiences.

It is not correct to assume that new national private sector channels will automatically become substitutes for transmissions of transnational origin. Unless they can capture an international audience the operations of such national organisations will not even be economically viable. The national private sector in communications will be automatically restricted in size by the commercial environment which supports it. In this context, considering the size and nature of probable investment in this sector, it is important that a cash strapped government assess the cost of setting up a permanent body such as the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. There may not be enough work to keep it busy. Such activity should be financed through fees paid by those putting up proposals and being provided services.

It is not correct to assume that the private sector always provides independent national and international news coverage and analyses and accommodates so-called 'cultural pluralism'. Apart from vested interests and political affiliations, the question of furthering commercial interests is important in private ventures and often leads to compromises with governments on what are generally considered matters of principle. The issue is not just of compromise with one government but all and any governments that may be in a position to further the commercial interests of media organisations. At present, in this field only the Press has sizeable private sec-

tor organisations in Pakistan. Serious questions are being raised about the extent to which it is a hostage of the government's advertisement quota system and the discretionary powers of the Ministry of Information in granting perks. The recruitment of journalists by intelligence agencies has undermined integrity and requires regulation by professional bodies and the industry itself.

Advances in technology have reduced the cost of information technology and related services. The introduction of fiber optic and satellite based telecommunication technology has led to an increase in facilities, broadening the telecommunication net within states and between them. These developments are taking place simultaneously in industrialised countries and in some of the poorest countries of the Third World where optimal commercial use is not possible. In most countries the actual cost of the service has been reduced although the savings may not have been passed on to consumers. In Pakistan advanced technology has reduced the actual cost of telecommunication but service charges have been enhanced therefore consumers pay more each year. There is a need to seriously examine how efficiency can be improved, theft, fraud and waste eliminated in order to reduce the cost to consumers. A first step has been taken through a reduction in government imposed duties in the 1997-1998 budget.

The globalisation of trade and commerce has created a culture in which the importance of information technology has been enhanced. Production patterns, marketing strategy and the management systems of multinational enterprises have been transformed. A recent development is monetary transactions through computer mediated communication and E-money. This has raised a new range of concerns regarding the regulation of international transfer of funds, tax laws and privacy issues. The government's proposal to computerise Federal and provincial tax collection and establish an Information Technology Commission is being seen in the light of an attempt by the first Nawaz Sharif government to do so. That attempt is reported to have cost tax payers Rs 600 million. This amount is reported to have gone into the pockets of a computer company, a software development company and their promoters, without any concrete, workable system being in place or even a pilot tax collection system on the ground. Before substantial