

Information overload

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relations, providing new knowledge of how to manipulate human s; by the amazing development of communication facilities in modern times; by the highly efficient control and organization of the propaganda machinery now possible; and by the proliferation of interest groups in our time.

The media has considerable power over the information available to the public. Television is probably the most effective technique being used to whip up passions and keep recalcitrant citizens in line, or otherwise promote nationalistic ideas.

But, like any revolutionary technology, television has its dark side. At its worst, television can foment and sustain the most violent of ethnic wars, as it did in the former Yugoslavia. Croatian and Serbian television routinely demonize each other's populations as terrorists and fascists. Occasionally, Serbian and

Croatian television would use the exactly same footage to document wartime atrocities, but with the identities of the victims and murderers reversed.

Despite the spread of satellite technology, many of the governments that now have a monopoly on the television message impose restrictions on the ownership of dishes. Expecting that dish technology could eventually outflank efforts to restrict ownership, many governments have tried to preempt the demand for private dishes altogether by building cable systems that will download and then distribute many satellite programmes, leaving the government firmly in control at the switch.

With the growth of communication tools like the internet, the flow of persuasive messages has been dramatically accelerated. For the first time ever, citizens around the world are participating in uncensored conversations about

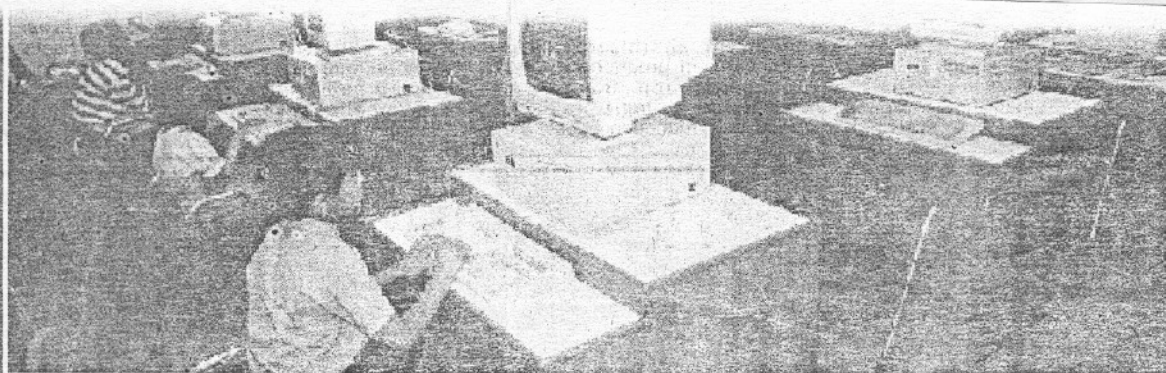
their collective future. This is a wonderful development, but there is a cost.

The information revolution has led to information overload, and people are confronted with hundreds of messages each day. Although few studies have looked at this topic, it seems fair to suggest that many people respond to this pressure by processing messages more quickly and, when possible, by taking mental short-cuts.

Propagandist love short-cuts — particularly those that short-circuit rational thought. They encourage this by agitating emotions, by exploiting insecurities, by capitalizing on the ambiguity of language, and by bending the rules of logic. As history shows, they can be quite successful.

Propaganda analysis exposed the tricks that propagandists use, and suggested ways of resisting the short-cuts that they promote. It is an antidote to the excesses of the information age.

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The thrust of Pakistan's software industry has been on exports of services and products. The reason is the success of this off-shore model largely due to the abundance of human resource in Pakistan and the resulting lower rates of professionals.

Due to this heavy reliance of the industry on exports and even the government's stress on this sector, not much development has been achieved for the local market. The computerisation of the local industries and sectors has not taken place and the utility of the IT sector has not transcended to the common man of the country. The utility of the IT industry has thus come down to foreign

exchange collection.

Other than the growth in the IT industry itself, the sector should also contribute largely towards the growth of a lot of other sectors and industries in the country. The utility of the investment in the IT sector should also be of uplifting the living standards of the nation. For this to happen, initiatives need to be given to the IT sector to concentrate a little on the local services and products.

One team of IT professionals has realised this need and has come up with a software for the local educational institutions aimed at completely revolutionising the system and mode of imparting education in the country.

"We were commissioned to design this software, called the Right Schooling System (RSS) for a school and once we completed the project, we realised that this was a software that no institution could do without. I took this novel software to a number of institutions and government departments in the educa-

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tion sector, but with no luck. Everyone loved the software and realised its significance, but apart from a couple of private institutions, they all shared the same problem — a lack of funds," exclaims Amir Abdul Rauf, the leader of the team that designed the software.

Instead of just sitting on the useful software and allow it to expire, Amir and his team have decided to instead offer the software free of cost. "Yes we are actually willing to offer the software free of cost to any educational institution willing to install it. This is a brilliant piece of software and is available free of cost with no strings attached. Now the question is why are we willing to offer it free of cost? Well we have this brilliant software that every institution has a use for and one that will be greatly beneficial for the students. Now not many of them have the resources to buy it from us and it will go to waste just lying around with us. It is only rational then for us to offer it for free, where it could become a real mode of change in the education standards of the country."

Understanding the difference that the software can bring is easy. One looks at the working of the software and its utility is obvious. The software offers an interface for educational institutions to monitor the growth and level of learning being imparted at their institution.

One of the main features of the software is how the student's performance and growth — both in academics and extra-curricular activities is followed and monitored. In fact the utility of the RSS is to record, maintain and analyse all sorts of information about the students and working of an institution. The institution can then in turn put this information to any use that it wants to monitor the growth of its students.

For example a student's performance is recorded in the software, and the RSS can be used to present his or her growth over the past year or semes-

ter and find out the particular areas in which the student needs more attention or where he or she has in fact picked up. Similarly the areas of interest of the student can also be monitored and thus the concept of career counseling can easily be introduced in Pakistani schools.

Similarly, other than the students' academic growth, his indulgence and performance in extra-curricular activities can also be monitored. So can his attendance, his health, his areas of interest, his class participation, his background, and in fact anything and everything about him is recorded and just a click away to be used for any sort of analysis about him or the make up of the institution.

The institution can also use the RSS to monitor and update its syllabi and teaching methods. The curriculum and the students' input is also monitored with the provision of planning the exact layout of the teaching courses. The institution can also alter its marking and result schemes by monitoring the performance of the students in different subjects. Uniformity also becomes a feature of the teaching methods by using the software.

RSS can also monitor the performance of its teachers, its teaching assistants, instructors and staff. By analysing the attendance of students for different lectures, the popularity and performance of the teachers can also be ascertained.

In short, the software takes care of the entire management of an institution with separate modules for library functioning, fees and scholarships, event planners, and alumni functions.

"One of the most useful aspect of the software has been its contribution in increasing the efficiency of the entire working of the institution. Slackness, whether at the end of the students or the teachers, is readily pointed out thanks

to the software and attention can be easily diverted where it is due," Kamran Malik, proprietor of KIMS institute in Lahore where the software has already been installed and is operating fully.

The interesting thing about the software is that it can be run even on one computer for a small or medium size school or college. Ideally, however there need to be at least four computers in different departments and sections of the institution to run the software for maximum utility. The person running or maintaining the RSS does not even have to be a computer literate and a basic training can be imparted over a week for the smooth operation of the software.

"We are willing to charge nothing for our time and services for the installation of the software, and the software we are offering for free anyway. The only cost the institution has to bear is for the hardware needed, like the computer(s) needed and the transport cost for our personnel coming to install the system if the institution is situated out of Lahore. Other than that the institution has to bear no expenses. Our only aim is to enable students to benefit from this software in any way. We feel that if installed at a large scale, the RSS can be used to identify the brilliant students in the country no matter how remote an area they come from. This system would provide the government and anyone for that matter with the complete data of the coming generation in every aspect and the utilisation of that data can be done in innumerable ways," adds Amir.

Members of Amir's team, including Amir himself, have been educated abroad with a skill-set comparable to anyone in the world, are working in the country and are offering their skills free of cost for the betterment of their nation. All they need is someone to give them the opportunity. Any takers?



proud creators. Photos: Rahat Dar