

A ride to remember

By Huma Yusuf

ROLLER coaster ride: now that's an overused cliché. The truth is, few events or trends boast the same ups and downs, twists and turns, thrills and spills, sense of anticipation and anticlimactic downer as a 100-second ride on a roller coaster. But if there is one context in which that metaphor can be aptly deployed, it's to describe the Pakistani news media landscape in 2009.

This year has seen Pakistani media undergo the same identity crisis that its pundits claim the nation is grappling with. Right-wing and revolutionary, reckless and responsible, free and fettered: the media landscape has been a minefield of contradictions and fissures. In a short span of 12 months, it has experienced some of its proudest moments, greatest tragedies, and shameful antics.

Many will remember 2009 for the reign of the right-wing media. Television talk show hosts became the source of innumerable conspiracy theories that divided the public on Pakistan's engagement in the war against terror. Even as news outlets reported that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan was claiming responsibility for suicide attacks across the country, influential anchors and opinion writers pointed fingers elsewhere, accusing 'foreign elements' — including the CIA, RAW, and even the Israeli secret service Mossad — of masterminding terrorist attacks here.

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media showed great maturity when, in November, eight leading television channels came together to craft guidelines on terrorism coverage. The industry bigwigs voluntarily decided to utilise time-delay mechanisms in live transmissions, refrain from broadcasting graphic images, exercise caution when covering hostage situations, and emphasise better training for reporters and camera crew. The decision to self-regulate helped the media industry stave off government intervention in this matter, thereby protecting press freedom.

Moreover, the media industry united to speak out against the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Ordinance. The legislation, which claims to target cyber terrorists, was interpreted by the media as an attempt to muzzle the press and clamp down on citizen journalism with its clauses against spoofing, criticising government officials, and using photographs or video footage without subjects' permission.

Another point of pride for the industry at large was the fact that reporters stayed on the job even in times of conflict. Many journalists have been caught in the crossfire between militants and the military, receiving threats and being targeted both by the Taliban and, by their estimation, the elusive "security establishment." According to Reporters Without Borders, five journalists have been killed in

Pakistan this year, including The News' Musa Khan Khel, who was kidnapped and killed while covering Maulana Sufi Mohammad's peace mission in Swat on February 18. In other incidents, Dawn columnist Kamran Shafi's house was fired on, and Khyber TV's Rehman Buneri's house was destroyed by militants after he spoke out against the Taliban in a radio interview. The most violent attack against the journalistic community took place on December 22, when a suicide bomber targeted the Peshawar Press Club, killing three and injuring 17.

That said, journalists working in Pakistan's tribal belt and Balochistan have been the hardest hit. In Bajaur, the Taliban issued an edict requiring journalists to get clearance from them before reporting militant deaths and demanded that the slain be referred to as 'martyrs.' In the face of intense pressure, the number of working journalists in Bajaur fell from 20 to less than 10 over the course of the year. Similarly, journalists in Balochistan admitted to heavy self-censoring again this year, owing to ongoing threats resulting from the separatist movement in that province.

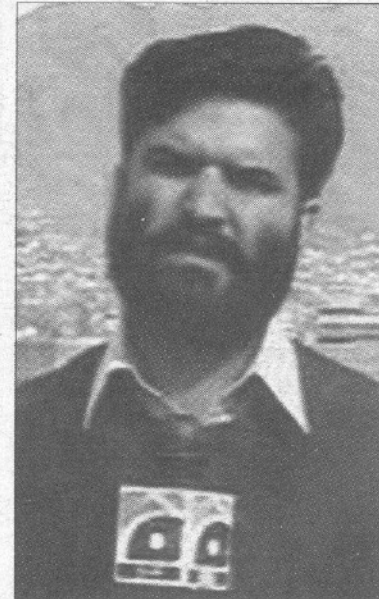
Given that many Pakistani journalists went beyond the call of duty this year, reporting even when their lives were threatened, one incident sent the proverbial roller coaster into a tailspin. A Lahore-based,

English-language daily claimed that Matthew Rosenberg, an American reporter for The Wall Street Journal, was a CIA agent. In a year when unsubstantiated facts, unnamed sources, and hearsay fed too many news headlines, this egregious reportage was seen to endanger the lives of all journalists in Pakistan, whether local or foreign, who can be identified by militants as spies and killed in cold blood.

While certain antics of the print and electronic media dominated most conversations about journalistic ethics in 2009, Pakistan's new media landscape echoed the ups and downs of its more traditional counterparts. In March this year, during the Lawyers' Movement, young Pakistani bloggers and student activists typed and texted when they could not march for an independent judiciary: Twitter feeds, live blogs, and YouTube videos helped document minute-by-minute developments in the historic showdown between the lawyers' community and opposition parties and the government in Islamabad.

The next month, in April, a video shot on a mobile phone camera showing a girl in Swat being flogged by extremists was widely circulated online, helping unite the country against the Taliban incursion into Malakand.

Similarly, bloggers united to help internally displaced people in the wake of the first military operation



JOURNALIST Musa Khan Khel was killed in the Matta Tehsil of Swat in February.

against the Taliban in Swat. Prominent blogs such as Teeth Maestro and CHUP consistently hosted heartbreaking descriptions and images of the conditions in IDP camps, organised fund-raising efforts, and coordinated calls for the government to do more to help IDPs.

Unfortunately, the Pakistani blogosphere's record is not flawless this year. Swept up by trends in the mainstream media, several blogs and independent websites went up in the

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Allegedly on the direction of the military, certain talk show hosts also fuelled the fires of debate surrounding Pakistan's acceptance of US aid under the Kerry-Lugar bill. The wave of anti-Americanism sparked by the media's coverage of the bill's conditionalities as well as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's confrontational visit in October spurred a strange situation in which the United States, rather than the Taliban, emerged as Pakistan's greatest enemy. A Gallup Pakistan poll released in mid-November showed that 59 per cent of Pakistanis believed the US posed a threat to the country (18 per cent were more threatened by India, while only 11 per cent were concerned about the Taliban).

As the year draws to a close, the media's rabid anti-Americanism has transformed into an unapologetic tussle with the government, in particular, the ruling Pakistan People's Party. While suicide attacks continue apace, the electronic media has shifted its focus away from terrorism to the fallout of the Supreme Court decision to declare the National Reconciliation Ordinance illegal. Open calls by television talk show hosts for President Asif Ali Zardari's resignation or impeachment have compelled the PPP to lash out against the fallacy of a 'trial by media.' Many expect 2010 to begin with a showdown between the electronic media and the elected government — a confrontation that will inevitably weaken one of the pillars of the Pakistani democratic setup, whether it be free speech or representative rule.

It would be unfortunate, however, if 2009 is only remembered as the year when Pakistani media gave up on objectivity. Indeed, the news

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Unfortunatly, despite the Pakistani blogosphere's record is not flawless this year. Swept up by trends in the mainstream media, several blogs and independent websites went up in the latter part of the year to identify and track the movements of alleged CIA officials, Blackwater (Xe) mercenaries, and other Americans suspected of foul play.

In a final twist in the roller coaster ride that was Pakistani media this year, radio broadcasts made it back into the headlines. In a news context, many believe that the medium of radio is fading into silence. But soon after assuming office as the president of the United States, Barack Obama overturned this belief by throwing the spotlight on illegal radio stations used by extremists in Malakand and Fata for recruiting militants, terrorising villagers, and inciting hatred.

Obama declared that Pakistan, and by extension the West, was losing the 'information' war against terror and put shutting down illegal FM radio stations high on the US agenda for Pakistan. Over the course of the year, Pakistan has received radio jamming equipment from the US and the military has specifically cracked down on radio transmitters in Swat. And in August this year, the ISPR launched its own radio stations — Radio Swat and Radio Waziristan — that offered religious, cultural, and community news programming to help counter the radical broadcasts of extremist clerics.

Ultimately, despite the ups and downs, 2009 was an important year for the news media in Pakistan. Lessons have been learnt in the context of the war against terror and the national impetus to preserve democracy and sovereignty at all costs. Now, more than ever, Pakistan's journalistic community is waking up to the fact that with freedom comes great responsibility. ■

Illustration by Ahror

