

**Annex IV**  
**Research Study on**

**Expansion of News Media**  
**and its Impact on Journalism in Pakistan**

# **Expansion of News Media & Its impact on Journalism in Pakistan**



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Society for

**Alternative** **media**  
and Research

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## Introduction

This study aims at exploring the changes that the Pakistani news media is undergoing with the specific objective of analyzing its impacts on the quality, credibility, respect and influence of journalists and journalism in Pakistan. It also tries to find out if a manifold increase in the number of news media outlets in Pakistan and the rise in the academic qualifications of journalists has contributed to higher wages and better and securer working conditions for those working in the news media.

To do so, it starts by listing the following general assumptions about the news media:

- a) that it has brought down the quality of journalism in Pakistan;
- b) that it has lowered the overall professional standards and skill levels of Pakistani journalists;
- c) that it has had a negative impact on the credibility and influence of both journalists and journalism;
- d) that it has increased commercialism to such an extent that independent and investigative journalism has become all but impossible;
- e) that it has exposed journalists to uncertain and exploitative employment conditions;
- f) that it has increased threats to the security and safety of journalists;
- g) that it has increased corruption among journalists.

It then explores whether the above-mentioned assumptions hold and if they do what factors could be responsible for that.

The method applied in this monograph is admittedly beset with many limitations. Most of the information contained in it is collected and culled through desk research. To back it up, around 20 interviews with a carefully selected group of key informants – including journalists, academics, analysts and opinion-makers – was conducted in October-November 2019 around the same set of questions.

Given the limitations of its methodology and other constraints such as its size and the time available for it, this study cannot be the most definitive work on the subject. It, indeed, is a personal analysis that draws heavily on the observations and experiences of some of the best known practitioners, analysts and teachers of journalism in Pakistan. It is also heavily indebted to many studies and research reports done earlier.

At the same time, however, it makes a serious attempt to i) avoid being facile and ii) steer clear of truisms. Instead of looking at the subject superficially and only confirming all that is already seen as generally true, it seeks to train a spotlight on the present and the recent past to show how these are as both a continuity of and a departure from the distant past. This has been done in order to

underscore the similarities and differences between what existed before the start of 2000s and what has replaced that since then.

## **Times are changing**

The advent of electronic and digital media in Pakistan since the early 2000s has been under criticism for most part of the current decade. Its detractors allege that it has transformed the business of news, the work routines and work ethics of journalists and the core function of journalism – mostly for the worse. The news business model that has been in operation for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century now also stands on its head. Newspapers, televisions and news websites are increasingly finding it difficult to finance their operations by selling their audiences to advertisers. Though the journalists today are more likely to be university graduates than their successors, their higher qualifications do not seem to have given them an understanding of the world around them which is a necessary condition for a journalist to be professionally sound. Journalism itself is not the same as it used to be – a top down one-way communication channel between informed and knowledgeable journalists and their audiences that required information and analysis in order to make informed social, political and economic choices. These audiences mostly consumed the information handed down to them by newspapers and television channels in a passive manner, only occasionally being able to share their views with journalists through letters to the editor or phone-in calls. Today, communication is a two-way highway. Terms such as user-generated content and citizen journalism have become a part of the mainstream discourse. Audiences can now conduct instant accountability of bad journalism, showing and sharing their reactions and responses instantly through social media platforms. Information is no longer the prerogative of a few score well-connected reporters, editors and talk show hosts but is available to everyone with access to internet. Nor are they the only ways with the ways and means to disseminate news. In fact, information has been seen to travel in the opposite direction these days in many news reports since they originate from user-generated contents or are first covered by citizen journalists.

These changes, of course, are not unique to Pakistan. Everywhere in the world, traditional news media outlets – such as newspapers and televisions are losing both audiences and advertisers to digital media platforms. There are concerns about the future of the news business and journalism in almost every country. What makes Pakistan different is its peculiar history of journalism which, until recently, thrived either because of its opposition to the state or due to its ability to partake in the state's largess through government advertising and concessional taxation etc. The space for dissent has shrunk and the government's financial resources are under serious public scrutiny and are also facing severe budgetary constraints. This is making it increasingly difficult for many parts of Pakistani news media to survive in a social and economic environment where their monopoly over information generation and dissemination, too, has been strongly challenged by social media platforms and user-generated contents.

## A false start

When Pakistan was carved out of the British-ruled India, the country's both wings – East Pakistan and West Pakistan -- hardly had any news media which was simultaneously independent and non-partisan. Those parts of the Indian subcontinent that became Pakistan only had a semi-official – but tiny -- English language press and many openly 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' newspapers which mainly vied to attract the attention of their own co-religionists<sup>1</sup>. This was especially the case in Lahore where communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims were the staple of the press which, indeed, aimed at political and religious mobilization rather than on informing and educating the people.

Pakistan's independence on 14 August 1947 initiated the collapse of Lahore's English-language newspapers. *Civil and Military Gazette*, which, as its name suggests, was meant to publicize changes and developments in the state's civilian and military policies, suffered a forced – though temporary -- shutdown as early as 1949 and eventually folded forever a few years later<sup>2</sup>. Simultaneously, the city's rambunctious and hate-mongering communal press also lost its relevance due to the migration of its non-Muslim population to India.

The center of news media's gravity shifted to Karachi after the independence, mainly because it became the capital of the newly created Pakistan and many 'Muslim' newspapers based in Delhi – including *Dawn* and *Jang* – migrated to it. They brought their audience with them from what became India after the partition. The Islamic nationalism of the Urdu-speaking nobility of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi also came with them as a perceived glue to keep together the ethnically and linguistically disparate parts of the new state<sup>3</sup>.

Urdu journalism prospered in Karachi till the 1970s when the influence and readership of Karachi-based press started waning, firstly, due to the change in the federal capital to Islamabad, secondly, because of the failure of Islamic nationalism to satisfy the linguistic, cultural, political and economic aspirations of the Bengalis of East Pakistan and, thirdly, as a result of the political rise of Punjabi industrial and middle classes and the heightened ethnic-linguistic awareness among Sindhis<sup>4</sup>. The new private media outlets that subsequently came into existence were mostly, if not entirely, based in places other than Karachi. Many of them were also in languages than Urdu.

Throughout the 1970 and 1980s, many new newspapers started in Lahore and Rawalpindi-Islamabad, including some in English. Even established media houses based in Karachi launched

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<sup>1</sup> Rao, Muhammad Ali. (2018), Pakistan movement and role of Muslim Press, *The News, Islamabad*, August 14, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/355071-pakistan-movement-and-role-of-muslim-press>

<sup>2</sup> Zamir, Niazi. (1986), *Press In Chains*, Royal Book Company, Karachi

<sup>3</sup> Khan, Sohaib .I. (2017), *Imagining Pakistan: Religion at the origins of Nationalism*, Marginalia, July 18, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/imagining-pakistan-religion-origins-nationalism/>

<sup>4</sup> Ahmer, Dr Monis. (2014), *They myth of Pakistani nationalism*, Dawn, August 14, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1125123>

their local editions in other cities. Meanwhile in non-Karachi Sindh, several Sindhi language news publications started their operations.

For the press in Lahore, this was a revival of sorts. It had experienced a reversal in its fortunes immediately after the independence when ‘Muslim’ newspapers of the British era started losing relevance and significance. The anti-Hindu stance they thrived on could not sustain them on its own since all the Hindus from Lahore had migrated to India. The need for a Muslim mobilization against them – as well as against the British imperialism – was no longer needed.

*Nawa-i-Waqat* was the only main survivor of this change, mainly because it realized early on that religious causes alone would not guarantee its continuity in the post-independence Pakistan<sup>5</sup>. It, thus, became a strong champion of a state-based Islamic nationalism – one that most other ‘Muslim’ newspapers in Lahore shunned due to their preference for a trans-state *umma*, or a global community of the faithful. Two other Islamist newspapers that subsequently prospered in Lahore – Shorish Kashmiri’s *Chattan*<sup>6</sup> and Nasim Hijazi’s *Kohistan*<sup>7</sup> - did so by fanning sectarianism and promoting a romanticized, in fact, fictionalized, versions of the history of various Muslim conquerors and kings of the past as a model for the new state of Pakistan to follow.

Ironically, it was also in Lahore that the first newspapers of a purely Pakistani origin – *Pakistan Times* in English and *Imroze* in Urdu – came about under the banner of Progressive Papers Limited in 1948. These publications, as the name of their publisher suggests, took a left of the center position on political and economic issues the new country was faced with. By 1959, these were silenced through their forced nationalization by the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan<sup>8</sup>. Till the late 1960s, therefore, the press in Lahore was mostly in the control of pro-state owners/editors or was directly owned by the state itself.

## The dark days

The years between the fall of Ayub Khan’s dictatorship and the secession of East Pakistan (1969-1971) witnessed a popular uprising of leftist intellectuals, students, pro-democracy activists, peasants and workers. The press in general – and left of the center newspapers and magazines in particular – also experienced a spurt of growth in these years. As also did news publications owned by political parties – dailies *Musawat* owned by Pakistan Peoples Party and *Jasarat* owned by Jamaat-e-Islami being the most notable among them. The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that replaced the military regime of General Yahya Khan in December 1971 arrested many journalists

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<sup>5</sup> Rasheed, Shahid. (2019), *Majid Nizami: A Preacher of Ideology*, The Nation, July 26, [<https://nation.com.pk/26-Jul-2019/majid-nizami-a-preacher-of-ideology>]

<sup>6</sup> Asif, Manan Ahmed. (2018), *The early champions of Anti-Ahmadi cause*, Nov 03, [<https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398687>]

<sup>7</sup> Ashraf, Haroon. (2016), *Naseem Hijazi: the master of historic fiction*, June 13, [<https://nation.com.pk/13-Jun-2016/naseem-hijazi-the-master-of-historic-fiction>]

<sup>8</sup> Zamir, Niazi. (1986), *Press In Chains*, Royal Book Company, Karachi



and banned many news publications but it could not put back the genie of the free press that – among many other factors – was both the cause and the effect of his coming into power.

The third military dictator, General Ziaul Haq, achieved the unenviable distinction of muzzling the press successfully. Starting in 1977, when Bhutto's government was toppled in a coup, Zia imposed severe restrictions on the press coverage of political parties as well as political activities and developments. Apart from banning a large number of left-leaning newspapers and magazines, including *Musawat*, and imprisoning and flogging journalists, he also enforced a stringent regime to censor the news both before and after its publication<sup>9</sup>. But while he clamped down heavily on political news, he could not care less about celebrity gossip replacing serious news, and glamor and scandal mongering supplanting investigative reporting. He was happy with anything that could divert the attention of people from politics. Through machinery imports at concessional tax rates, generous newsprint quotas and other freebies, he, in fact, subsidized news organizations that helped him in his quest for keeping the press free of politics. He also allowed relatively more freedom to the English language press than he could tolerate for the news outlets operating in Pakistani languages. This explains why a large number of English news publications, including *The Muslim*, *Frontier Post* and *The Nation*, started their operations during his regime which otherwise is regarded as being the most inimical to the freedom of the press.

This was also the time when journalism first became a career option for young university graduates. Till then it was mostly a vocation for the ideologically motivated and literary types.

## Power play

The democratically elected governments that followed Zia's dictatorship in and after 1988 not just removed his restrictions on the press, they also initiated the process of ending the state's monopoly over the airwaves. Several local and foreign news channels, including those from India, could beam their broadcasts into Pakistan<sup>10</sup> through traditional and satellite dish antennas and a few FM radio stations, too, started their operations<sup>11</sup>.

However, by the time democracy came back to the country in 1988, a new breed of apolitical, 'professional' journalists was replacing an older and politically conscious generation in newsrooms. The governments of the day, therefore, soon faced a massive challenge of acceptability from the press corps which was increasingly more uninterested in the broader structural and ideological problems afflicting the state and the society than it was in highlighting the mismanagement and misuse of the political, administrative and financial powers.

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<sup>9</sup> Zamir, Niazi. (1986), *Press In Chains*, Royal Book Company, Karachi

<sup>10</sup> Siddique, Shahbaz. (2015), *The Evolution of Television in Pakistan*, Center for Media Psychology Research, Pakistan, June 13, [<http://nucleustelelevision.com/cmprp/the-evolution-of-television-in-pakistan/>]

<sup>11</sup> Moni, Qasim A. (2017), *Pakistani radio's evolutionary journey*, Dawn, February 13, [<https://www.dawn.com/news/1314506>]

A largely market-driven economy led by the private sector started emerging in Pakistan for the first time in those years due to privatization and denationalization of the industrial and financial sectors and the liberalization of domestic and foreign trade. Consequently, the state's economic clout waned, weakening its ability to control the press through the import of newsprint (which was the sole prerogative of the government till then) and official ads (the loss of which could now be compensated largely by the private sector advertising).

But the democratic governments of that era still needed help from the press to reach out to the electorate. This gave many reporters, editors and newspaper owners an oversized sense of self-importance as players and brokers in the game of power rather than just being honest and fair observers and critics of it. For the first time in the country's history, they started believing that they could undermine, if not remove, ministers and even governments. When, towards the end of the 1990s, Jang Group engaged itself in a war of attrition with the then government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, it only proved that the news media was no longer contented with being a bystander to the goings on in the power corridors.

## Turning a new leaf

The conflict between Jang Group and Nawaz Sharif busted many myths about the state of news media in Pakistan at the end of a decade of liberalization and freedom. Firstly, it disproved that the university-trained 'professional' journalists would follow higher journalism standards than their predecessors who were mostly, if not entirely, the votaries of various competing ideologies. Secondly, it showed that the private sector was still too small to support the entire national press on its own. Thirdly, it falsified the perception that the government did not have any powers any more to curb the freedom of the press. Sharif's administration, in fact, not just successfully deployed the older tools of import controls and restrictions on adverts, it also targeted reporters, editors and the owners of Jang Group with laws originally promulgated to combat terrorism and ensure national security<sup>12</sup>.

By the time General Pervez Musharraf's military government replaced its civilian predecessor, large parts of the press either reported the change neutrally or they actively supported the military's takeover of power. Within a decade after Zia's martial law, the pro-democracy united front that was formed between politicians and working journalists in the 1980s lay tattered at the altar of commercialization of the press and professionalization of journalism on the one hand and the permanently frayed civil-military relations on the other.

Musharraf started off by setting up what was ominously called RAMBO – short for Regulatory Authority for Media Broadcast Organizations. It was necessitated by technological changes taking

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<sup>12</sup> Cooper, Kenneth J. (1999), Government, top paper square off in Pakistan, Washington Post, February 11, [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1999/02/11/government-top-paper-square-off-in-pakistan/488979cb-58aa-4bb4-b921-6ebf4fb30f47/>]

place in media and broadcasting technologies as well as in global economy. While a combination of communication satellites and fiber optics was helping media contents generated and released in one corner of the world to reach another corner at the speed of light, state barriers were proving ineffective to keep foreign media outlets out of domestic media markets. The ostensible purpose of setting up RAMBO was to facilitate an expansion in the number of media houses and media outlets operating in the country – in order to increase the news choices and options people could have – while simultaneously devising ways and means to regulate the creation of media’s contents<sup>13</sup>. In practice, its 2002 avatar – Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) – did little more than working as an auction house for new television channels and radio stations.

This was mainly because Musharraf saw – and used – PEMRA as a window of opportunity. He saw how the Indian media had launched a global publicity blitzkrieg on behalf of the Indian state during the Pakistan-India war in Kashmir’s Kargil sector in 1999. India’s media campaign was so effective that its domestic audience as well as international opinion makers accepted the Indian state’s stance hook, line and sinker<sup>14</sup>. He was also increasingly frustrated over the failure of the state-owned Pakistan Television (PTV) to project Pakistani state’s point of views in the national and global arenas as effectively as the Indian media was promoting that of India’s. He then had a personal experience of the immense power of private news television when, in June 2001, he had a conversation with leading Indian television talk show hosts and reporters during the Agra Summit with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. Through his live comments on the bilateral issues, he wrested the initiative from the Indian leadership as far as the Agra negotiations between the two countries were concerned<sup>15</sup>.

He, therefore, was ready to dish out licenses for television channels and radio station on the sole promise that they would fully support his government’s foreign, regional and economic policies. The biggest concession that Musharraf made in return for this Faustian bargain was to allow cross-media ownership. Under this provision, owners of newspapers and magazines could open and run broadcast media outlets as well. Similarly, owners of television channels and radio stations could own and run newspapers and magazines. In the decade between 2002 and 2012, every major newspaper publisher also came to own multiple television channels – and every privately owned broadcast media house worth the name ventured into publishing news (and analysis) in print. So, while Jang Group, Nawa-i-Waqt Group, Dawn Group and Express Group all launched television channels of their own, Dunya News, ARY News, 92 News all started their own daily newspapers. Hum TV, a rather late entrant into the news business, also felt it necessary to have a news magazine of its own as it bought an English monthly, *Newsline*.

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<sup>13</sup> Sohail, Amna Syeda. *Ofcom, PEMRA and Mighty Media Conglomerates (Master’s Thesis), the University of Twente, the Netherlands*, Available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/977c/cee12e7998a96ec9bd89f24f19d9724081e6.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Das, Debak. (2019), *Indian diplomacy during the Kargil war: Success with a limited legacy*, South Asian Voices, May 29, [\[https://southasianvoices.org/indian-diplomacy-during-kargil-war/\]](https://southasianvoices.org/indian-diplomacy-during-kargil-war/)

<sup>15</sup> Joseph, Josy & Bhatt, Sheela. (2001), *Musharraf blindsides Vajpayee with media blitz*, Rediff on the Net, July 16, [\[https://m.rediff.com/news/2001/jul/16inpak8.htm\]](https://m.rediff.com/news/2001/jul/16inpak8.htm)

The initial expansion of the television news in Pakistan, therefore, did not happen at the expense of print journalism. This, according to Aamir Ghauri, editor of *The News International*'s Islamabad edition, was because television was still not “breaking stories”. The stories, he says, were “being broken by journalists who are working with newspapers”. Television programs “only picked them up” because the production houses of those televisions did “not have strong news gathering teams”. So, according to Ghauri, they focused on daily developments of political stories. “The stories about economy, human rights, education, health and society were still being reported by serious newspapers and print journalists.”

The two mediums, in fact, continued to prosper together for between 2002 and 2012. In Lahore alone, many newspapers and television channels were launched in those years. These included newspapers such as *Daily Times*, *Waqt*, *Din*, *Nai Baat*, *Dunya News* and television channels such as Duya News, Waqt TV, Business Plus and Express News. According to a PEMRA report, the number of privately owned television channels in Pakistan increased from zero in 1999 to 71 in 2009. More than one-third of them were dedicated to reporting news and news analysis. The number of private FM radio stations rose from zero to 111 in the same period<sup>16</sup>. No pre-2009 data is available for the print media but the number of daily newspapers continued to increase till 2016 when it stood at 409. The same number was 343 in 2009<sup>17</sup>.

These developments upended two main objectives of the new regulatory regime: to diversify the sources of news and news analysis and to regulate media contents in accordance with international best practices and local rules and regulations. Cross-media ownership not just helped large media houses monopolize news audiences<sup>18</sup>, it also helped them bypass, avoid and even flout rules and regulations because of their political and social clout<sup>19</sup>.

Cross-media ownership also had a negative impact on the overall quality of the news media's output. “Many outlets of print journalism have compromised their ethics and quality with the advent of electronic media platforms run by their owners,” says Dr Jabbar Khattak, a newspaper publisher and editor in Karachi. “Print media has also suffered along with electronic media” as far as “standards and ethics” are concerned.

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<sup>16</sup> Parveen, Saima & Bhatti, Muhammad Nawaz. (2018), Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship in Pakistan: A historical study, Journal of Historical Studies, University of Sarghoda, Sarghoda, [<https://bzu.edu.pk/jhs/vol4-II/1.%20freedom%20of%20Expression.pdf>]

<sup>17</sup> Provincial Public Relation Departments & Punjab Development Statistics, Lahore. (2009), *Newspapers and Periodicals by Province*, [<http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/tables/Newspapers%20and%20Periodicals%20by%20Province.pdf>]

<sup>18</sup> Baig, Asad & Cheema, Umar. (2014-15), Broadcast Journalism in Pakistan: A Hostage to Media Economics, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, [<http://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Broadcast-Media-in-Pakistan-Hostage-to-Media-Economy.pdf>]

<sup>19</sup> Bolo Bhi. (2015), *Cross media ownership and media reform*, January 7, [<https://bolobhi.org/cross-media-ownership-media-reform/>]

## New Realities

There were three reasons for the news media's expansion in Pakistani post 2002: i) resumption under Musharraf regime of the media industry's liberalization of that initially started in 1990s – but was briefly stalled due to the dispute between Jang Group and Prime Minister Sharif; ii) privatization of various sectors of economy such as education, healthcare, telecommunication and power generation which, together with previous rounds of privatization, facilitated the emergence of a new middle class comprising such professionals as bankers, financial experts, engineers, teachers, doctors, techies, administrators, managers and salespersons; and iii) growth in consumer spending – and the attendant increase in demand for such consumer goods as motorcycles, cars, home appliances, television sets, phones, foods and beverages – spurred by the availability of easy money. The last of these factors was made possible by the influx of huge amounts of foreign money to Pakistan in the form of increased remittances from Pakistanis working abroad and as aid and loans provided by the United States and its European allies in order to keep Pakistan on their side in what was then called the global war on terror<sup>20</sup>. Simultaneously, and in an unprecedented move, banks started offering credit cards and other products at historically low interest rates to finance mass consumption of consumer goods<sup>21</sup>.

This bustling consumer economy needed advertising vehicles to connect the supply of consumer goods with where their demand lay. Hence the unprecedented growth in television channels and newspapers – since both have had a proven track record elsewhere in the world of performing that function effectively.

Two other factors also contributed to the growth of television news channels in the 2000s. When PTV alone was broadcasting news, it could not develop a loyal news audience due to its focus on promoting the political agenda of the government of the day. Nobody really believed what PTV said in its news bulletins. There was, however, a huge unmet demand for news and news analysis among Pakistani television audiences in those years because Musharraf regime was engaged in a large scale political engineering and the security within Pakistan and its immediate neighborhood was precarious. This demand explains why those who could afford dish antennas were tuning into Indian and other foreign news channels. The emergence of private news channels catered to it by offering Pakistani audiences a Pakistani perspective on their domestic circumstances as well as on regional and global developments directly or indirectly impacting their lives.

The initial offerings of private television were also much better than what followed. “There was a lot of experimentation in the beginning,” says talk show host Amber Rahim Shamsi. “There were investigative programs and long form documentaries.” Many people also started trusting certain

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<sup>20</sup> Ryan, Clarke. (2011), *Crime-Terror Nexus in South Asia – States, security and non-state actors*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, [<https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=IQcbifg739IC&pg=PA171&lpg=PA171&dq=musharraf+consumer+finance+pakistan&source=bl&ots=Jm8CTWBv8m&sig=ACfU3U2VYpbFAeh0IgfQJwO1wFbtDpGBzA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiEtq6M0rLnAhUgRxUIHskrC8k4ChDoATADegQICRAB#v=onepage&q=musharraf%20consumer%20finance%20pakistan&f=false>]

<sup>21</sup> Hussain, Ishrat. (2005), *Banking Sector Reforms in Pakistan*, Blue Chip, [<https://www.bis.org/review/r050203e.pdf>]

news channels more than others because these had employed some of the best known journalists with vast experience in print media.

Equally importantly, television news did not require its audience to be educated – as was the case with print journalism – and thus could reach the semi-literate, nominally literate and even illiterate people (which in 2002 constituted more than 50 per cent of the total population of the country<sup>22</sup>).

The combined effect of the demand for news and news analysis finding supply it could rely on and the breaking of the education barrier was massive. The numbers suddenly multiplied: by 2009, there were 1600 licensed cable operators in Pakistan and they were serving as many as five million subscribers<sup>23</sup>, including households, offices and businesses. The estimated number of people watching the cable-provided television channels at that time stood at 38 million<sup>24</sup>.

## The good, the bad and the ugly

Since news and news analysis on politics were not as much under the scrutiny of censorship during Musharraf regime as these were during Zia's time, political reporting in print journalism became more sophisticated, inquisitive and critical post 2002 than it ever was. Rather than focusing only on scandalizing and undermining politicians and political parties – as many journalists did during the 1990s on their own as well as allegedly at the behest of the security and intelligence agencies – reporters and analysts were now able to cast the net wider both metaphorically and literally. They interviewed and reported on the activities of leaders in exile – most important of them being Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto; they questioned and critiqued many political moves by Musharraf's administration, including his attempts to keep leading political parties and their leaders out of the political arena and encourage splinter groups within the opposition; they criticized his use of a politically convenient and selective accountability as a means to strengthen his own rule; they covered the court trials of politicians incarcerated under various charges; and they challenged the legitimacy of a highly flawed referendum that Musharraf regime conducted in April 2002 to give his rule some semblance of popular legitimacy.

The incipient news television channels mostly mirrored this coverage. “For the first time, we were hearing opposition parties, we were hearing civil society, we were hearing traders’ bodies, lawyers and others,” says Adnan Rehmat, a media development expert based in Islamabad.

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<sup>22</sup> Pakistan Economic Survey 2007-08. The Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan, <http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters/10-Education08.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Parveen, Saima & Bhatti, Muhammad Nawaz. (2018), Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship in Pakistan: A historical study, Journal of Historical Studies, University of Sarghoda, Sarghoda, <https://bzu.edu.pk/jhs/vol4-II/1.%20freedom%20of%20Expression.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Ricchiardi, Sherry. (2012), *Challenges for Independent News Media in Pakistan, A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance*, National Endowment for Democracy, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Challenges%20for%20Independent%20News%20Media%20in%20Pakistan\\_Ricchiardi.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Challenges%20for%20Independent%20News%20Media%20in%20Pakistan_Ricchiardi.pdf)

Musharraf was not bothered – at least in the early years – about the coverage of his political moves as long as the news media portrayed him as a modernizer and a liberalizer of both the economy and the society. He was extremely conscious of Pakistan’s – and his own regime’s – image abroad and tried many things to portray the country’s – and his administration’s – soft side globally<sup>25</sup>. He encouraged BBC to start Question Time Pakistan, on the pattern on its highly successful show across the border, Question Time India, and graced many of its episodes with his own presence, taking live questions and responding to them then and there. He also wanted the Pakistani news media to support his policies towards the war on terror in general and vis-à-vis the United States and India in particular. Television channels, and to a lesser extent newspapers, did, in fact, as he wanted them to – at least initially.

The 2005 earthquake, too, came in as a major distraction from politics for the news channels – and rightly so. It was a catastrophe and tragedy of unprecedented scale and deserved extensive and intensive media coverage in order to ensure that rescue, relief and rehabilitation efforts were effective. And the news media mostly did the job very well except, of course, in a few memorably shoddy instances -- more of which later.

By most standards, the earthquake coverage was a high point in the history of Pakistani news media in spite of the fact that communication infrastructure was destroyed in most of the disaster-hit areas and around 50 journalists based there were reported to have lost their lives<sup>26</sup>. Reporters, camerapersons and talk show hosts spent days – in some cases, weeks -- in mountainous regions struck by the quake. They travelled, sometimes on foot, to high peaks and remote hamlets, often passing through tough and hazardous terrain, to report stories of individual and collective misery. In many cases, they managed to reach the worst impacted sites before the arrival of any rescuers and relief. They stood guard over the distribution of aid to ensure fairness and equity and monitored relief and rehabilitation efforts diligently to plug the chances of misuse and misappropriation.

But the earthquake also posed serious ethical dilemmas to private Pakistani news channels which admittedly were too new to cover it flawlessly. In some cases, reporters and cameraperson sidestepped or even overstepped the ethical boundaries that bar the news media from intruding into the privacy of individual lives and households. In other cases, the dying moments and the conditions of the injured were sensationalized allegedly to attract audiences. Fact-checking and verification of stories through multiple sources was ignored more often than not in order to beat the competition in breaking news. This breaking news phenomenon, according to Faizullah Jan, a teacher of media studies in Peshawar, “entailed collecting maximum information in minimum possible time which leaves no space or time for adding any context or perspective to it”.

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<sup>25</sup> Mansoor A. (2005), *Musharraf in search of a soft world image for Pakistan*, Khaleej Times, March 7,

[<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/editorials-columns/musharraf-in-search-of-a-soft-world-image-for-pakistan>]

<sup>26</sup> IRIN. (2005), *Pakistan: Impact of local media reporting the earthquake*, Oct 28, [<https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-impact-local-media-reporting-earthquake>]

Sad and somber musical notes were unnecessarily played in the backdrop of earthquake stories and noisy, kitschy graphics were added to news alerts. In some extreme cases, film songs would be played as a background score for news reports – as, indeed, was already the case with the coverage of other subjects such as politics, crime, culture and corruption.

The coverage of religious militancy was another blind spot for the news television channels. Instead of doing investigative backgrounders, reporters and talk show hosts showed gory images from the sites of terrorist attacks and hospitals and thereby contributed to a desensitization of the public opinion towards the dangers of religious terrorism<sup>27</sup>. This, perhaps, was in tandem with the government’s objective of scaring the world into helping us generously with aid and loans while allowing terrorist organizations to exist and operate with a high degree of impunity within Pakistan.

The flaws in the coverage of terrorism and other humanitarian subjects also resulted from a lack of experience and expertise within television newsrooms and reporting desks. With a near five-fold increase in the number of working journalists – from 2000 to 10,000 – in just a few years between 2002 and 2010<sup>28</sup> meant that a large number of this human resource was either ill-trained or completely untrained. “The number of channels was too many and the talent pool where they could recruit from was limited,” says senior journalist and human rights activist I A Rehman.

Dr Erfan Aziz, a teacher of media studies in Karachi, blames the lack of skills among new journalists upon the gap in the demand and supply of university graduates. “A huge number of journalists was needed but journalism graduates were never there in the required number.” The problem, according to him, worsened because media houses failed to “provide training to this new breed”. Also, he says, everyone with a degree in hand could walk in and get a job in those heady years. “There was no vetting of the new entrants in the same manner that there is accreditation for engineers and lawyers.”

On the other hand, says Dr Jabbar Khattak, news media houses turned their focus on making their journalists more presentable than being skilled. “Faces have become popular,” he remarks.

Many journalists who came to occupy senior positions in news channels were plucked from print outlets, given some basic training and assigned new tasks. This staff hiring strategy was flawed on multiple counts. Their technological understanding of the electronic and digital media being

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<sup>27</sup> Haider SA (2016) *A Critical Study of how the Taliban Capitalize on Electronic Media Sensationalism in Pakistan*. Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism 6: 292. doi:10.4172/2165-7912.1000292 [<https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/a-critical-study-of-how-the-taliban-capitalize-on-electronic-mediasensationalism-in-pakistan-2165-7912-1000292.pdf>]

<sup>28</sup> Baig, Asad & Cheema, Umar. (2014-15), Broadcast Journalism in Pakistan: A Hostage to Media Economics, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, <http://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Broadcast-Media-in-Pakistan-Hostage-to-Media-Economy.pdf>



limited, the print journalists migrating to television could not translate their experience of the press into high quality television journalism.

The departure of senior journalists from newspapers, on the other hand, had the unintended consequence of hollowing out print journalism. Most print newsrooms and reporting desks across the country lost their best and the most experienced staff and were left with only inexperienced and semi-skilled junior journalists. Newspaper reporters became lazy, says Ayaz Khan, a senior newspaper editor based in Lahore. “They just picked tickers from the electronic media and created stories.”

According to Haroon Rashid, the Islamabad-based editor of an international news outlet’s Pakistan office, this type of copying is actually a cross-media phenomenon. New organizations are putting online mostly what they run on their television channels or they are using user-generated mobile material.”

Television channels were also able to attract workers with relatively better journalistic and technical skills because they offered much better salaries than newspapers. When finally newspapers realized that they could retain their senior staff, or recruit high quality new workers only by matching their average salaries with those in television, they also found out that doing so would increase their costs exponentially. Many of them could not sustain this increase in the long run, forcing them to fire senior journalists who were highly paid and replacing them with newbies willing to work on a pittance.

## The fatal flaw

By the middle of 2006, the contradictions of Musharraf's rule had started to become apparent. His consumption-based economic growth had saddled many people with debts they had no means to pay back; his social liberalization was running afoul with the clergy and the conservative sections of the society; his local government systems had annoyed some of his own political allies; his administrative reforms had displeased the bureaucracy; the American patience with his policy of selective targeting of terrorist groups based in Pakistan was running thin; public opinion in general and religious groups in particular were turning against him over the continued enforced disappearances of Islamist activists; and his continued ambition to stay in power was forcing his political opponents to join hands against him.

Then came three tipping points in quick succession: The assassination of Baloch chieftain Akbar Bugti in a military operation in Balochistan's Kohlu region during a military operation; the sacking of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March 2007 and a security operation in federal capital Islamabad's Lal Masjid in the summer of the same year. In each case, Musharraf's actions stirred a hornet's nest that would contribute to his eventual downfall.

Bugti's killing gave a new impetus to a 60-year old Baloch ethnic insurgency in Balochistan. It would take hundreds of missing and dead people and ten years to quell. Chaudhry's removal triggered the lawyers' movement and also resulted in the carnage of pro-Chaudhry protesters at the hands of pro-Musharraf assailants in Karachi on 12 May 2007. And Lal Masjid operation generated a whole breed of suicide bombers who would blow themselves up in public places as well as at sensitive installations with a regular frequency and deadly intensity.

Journalist from both print and television widely covered each of the three subjects both intensively and extensively. Reporters and talk show hosts went across Balochistan to do special reports and broadcasts dedicated to highlighting the causes and effects of the conflict there; Chaudhry's rallies and public addresses received wall to wall coverage wherever he went throughout Punjab; and Lal Masjid became a favorite locale for investigative reporters trying to find out how many people were actually killed there and how many of them were young, poor and orphaned female students of a madrassa linked to the mosque. Musharraf's entire public relations machinery could not reverse the disastrous impacts of how the news media covered these developments, blaming them entirely on him<sup>29</sup>.

Musharraf subsequently imposed many restrictions on the media. He banned several talk show hosts from appearing on television and convinced the authorities in the United Arab Emirates

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<sup>29</sup> Javaid, Anam. (2014), 'Any regrets, General? The role of media in the fall of General Pervez Musharraf from power', Master's, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway, [\[https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/41462/Anam\\_Javaid\\_Final.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y\]](https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/41462/Anam_Javaid_Final.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

(UAE) to pull the plug on Geo News television which was operating from there<sup>30</sup>. When he finally imposed an emergency rule in November 2007, suspending all fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, his entire project of building a soft image of the Pakistani state and society around his vaguely defined idea of ‘enlightened moderation’ fell flat on its face.

In many ways, Pakistan came full circle in 2007 to a situation when Musharraf had overthrown Nawaz Sharif in 1999: Back then, too, we had an economic and political emergency in place, a bruising tussle between the judiciary and the government had left both sides shorn of legitimacy, the civil-military gulf had widened on every issue of national importance; sectarian terrorism was running amok in different parts of the realm; and the government of the day was engaged in an unwinnable dispute with the country’s largest media group.

The loss of 2008 election by Musharraf’s political allies could, at least partially, be credited to how the news media<sup>31</sup> portrayed them as the lackeys of a dictator, willing to plumb to any depths to keep him in good cheer and, thereby, reap political and financial dividends. Journalists, however, could not switch off their activist mode even after Musharraf left the scene in the latter half of 2009. They failed to change gears in favor of a democratic dispensation in spite of the fact that an elected civilian government had returned to power after a hiatus of around a decade<sup>32</sup>.

This failure could be ascribed mostly to the de-politicization of the society in general and the news media in particular, a process that started in the 1980s under Zia, continued through the 1990s thanks to the liberal economic policies of that decade and got a shot in the arm with Musharraf’s post-modernist liberal philosophy that undermined the ideological quotient in national politics.

The other factor responsible for the problem was that the younger recruits in the ever-enlarging media corps were graduates of a largely private education system that had no room for a political consciousness, let alone an ideology-driven awareness. It made them good technicians but did not equip them with an understanding of the larger economic, cultural, political and strategic contexts of the developments and actions they saw and reported on. They were raised in a milieu in which even international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, were promoting an apolitical version of politics – one that did not bother about the macro-level questions – under such catch-all phrases as ‘good governance’ and ‘service-delivery’<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Masood, Salman. (2007), *Musharraf issues decree cracking down on news media*, The New York Times, June 5,

[\[https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/05/world/asia/05pakistan.html\]](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/05/world/asia/05pakistan.html)

<sup>31</sup> Bajwa, Hena Khurshed. (2016). *Pakistani media, public opinion and the downfall of Pervez Musharraf: News attribute agenda-setting and cognitive liberation in the lawyers’ movement*, The University of Texas at Austin,

[\[https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/39462/BAJWA-DISSERTATION-2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y\]](https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/39462/BAJWA-DISSERTATION-2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>32</sup> Gul, Mehnaz & Obaid, Zia, Ali, Shahid. (2017). *Liberlization of Media in Pakistan: A Challenge to Democracy*.

[\[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321904818\\_Liberalization\\_of\\_Media\\_in\\_Pakistan\\_A\\_Challenge\\_to\\_Democracy\]](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321904818_Liberalization_of_Media_in_Pakistan_A_Challenge_to_Democracy)

<sup>33</sup> Drake, Elziabet et al. (2001-02), *Good Governance and the World Bank*, Master’s, Nuffield College, University of Oxford,

[\[https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/drivers\\_urb\\_change/urb\\_economy/pdf\\_glob\\_SAP/BWP\\_Governance\\_World%20Bank.pdf\]](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/drivers_urb_change/urb_economy/pdf_glob_SAP/BWP_Governance_World%20Bank.pdf)

The political model championed by these financial institutions was narrowly focused on technocratic concepts of efficiency, accountability and measurable indicators for governance. Its champions – and the news media is brimful of them – fail to acknowledge that these concepts cannot be fully realized in a country like Pakistan where some larger questions are yet to be addressed. These questions include, but are not limited to, ethnic and religious divisions, financial and educational inequities and inequalities, disparities between the rich and the poor (among individuals and well as among regions within the state), the fraught relationship between different, and often competing, institutions of the state and the society, perennial inter-provincial tensions, a lack of consensus on the nature of relationship between the center and the provinces and the unresolved division of power and responsibilities between the civil and military parts of the polity. The list, indeed, can go on forever.

But raised on a steady diet of anti-politics diatribes -- dished out by public intellectuals and educational curricula and reinforced by international financial institutions -- the young 'professionals' in Pakistani journalism have, thus, further contributed to the weakening of the already fragile parliamentary, political and civilian institutions. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government and President Asif Ali Zardari faced one media debacle after the other – and earned no accolades for ensuring a smooth transition from a military-led dispensation to a civilian one.

Zardari was never the media's favorite. It was, indeed, a news media outlet that gave him the infamous moniker of Mr Ten Per Cent<sup>34</sup>. After his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December 2007 in Rawalpindi, every step that he took was portrayed and vilified as having been taken only for his personal financial gain. He became a target of choice for the news media to release many pent up political, cultural and economic frustrations left behind by Musharraf's long military reign and multiple domestic and regional fault lines that the military ruler had created and left in his wake.

Zardari had a major disadvantage when compared to Musharraf. Punjab, the most populous and most prosperous province in Pakistan, and Karachi, the country's single largest population center, were unwilling to give him any benefit of the doubt. These two regions had, quite ungrudgingly, accepted Musharraf's rule for a good seven years between 1999 and 2006. Since the audience and the headquarters of news media organizations are also concentrated in Punjab and Karachi, targeting Zardari and his party's government became an automatic choice for the producers as well as the consumers of news. From the word go, his administration developed a testy relationship with the news media on every conceivable issue in the country – from economy and corruption to terrorism and foreign relations. He, however, refrained from imposing any curbs on media freedoms and somehow managed to resist the temptation of deploying the ever-available financial and administrative tools to coerce journalists and media outlets into submission. By the time

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<sup>34</sup> Burns, John F. (1998), *The Bhutto Millions; A Background Check far from Ordinary*, Jan 9, [<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/09/world/the-bhutto-millions-a-background-check-far-from-ordinary.html>]

monsoon floods hit vast tracts of the land across Pakistan, the battle lines were already drawn. The news media bludgeoned the government with ceaseless criticism for any real or imagined flaws in its flood rescue and relief efforts.

Ironically, the coverage of floods also represented a very low point in the news media's own history. Many news outlets, reporters and talk show hosts did not bother much about ethics and codes of conduct while mongering fear and adopting cheap tactics such as standing in water while reporting<sup>35</sup>. In order to cater to its large audience in Punjab, the news media also started advocating the construction of a politically divisive dam on the river Indus<sup>36</sup>, blaming the government of the day for being an obstacle in its way.

At the same time, almost all the news outlets started portraying the military's involvement in disaster mitigation efforts in a highly positive light<sup>37</sup>. This, coupled with accolades the army's rank and file won from the news media for a successful security operation against Taliban in Swat, allowed the military to recoup public approval it had lost due to the excesses of Musharraf's military regime.

News media owners must have thought that by running these public relations campaign on the behalf of men in uniform, they had ingratiated themselves with the most powerful institution in the country. They must have believed that their brief estrangement with the military establishment in 2007-08 had come to an end and the two sides were together again – as they have been since the start of Zia's era. The only difference between 2010 and 1980s being that working journalists vociferously resisted the martial law then even though their employers were willingly doing what they were being told to do by Zia's regime<sup>38</sup> but now a large number of working journalists, reporters and talk show hosts, too, were happy to be seen as the military's brand ambassadors.

This contrast can be explained by looking at the rather apolitical personal histories of the younger news media personnel. Most of them also belong to middle class which, in developing countries such as Pakistan and India, is seen to prefer quick administrative fixes offered by strongmen rather than the structural solutions that a genuine democracy seeks to find through consensus building which could be both messy and prolonged. PPP aimed at doing the latter when, soon after coming into power, it started consultations for the passage of a constitutional amendment that sought to address many imbalances of the Pakistani polity, particularly the one between its center and the federating units. The news media projected the whole process for the amendment's passage as a wasteful deployment of the government's time and resources on constitutional niceties which,

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<sup>35</sup> Zaheer, Lubna. (2016), *Media coverage of natural disasters in Pakistan: The case of earthquake (2005), flood (2010) and famine (2014)*, JRSP, Vol.53, June-July, [<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f6a1/339713e2da1bf829184d5198349da06e17fc.pdf>]

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.rferl.org/a/Pakistani\\_Floods\\_Revive\\_Debate\\_About\\_Controversial\\_Dam/2125563.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Pakistani_Floods_Revive_Debate_About_Controversial_Dam/2125563.html)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/08/pakistan-floods-army-popular-zardari-anger>

<sup>38</sup> Zamir, Niazi. (1986), *Press In Chains*, Royal Book Company, Karachi

many newsmen averred, did little to ameliorate the plight of people hankering after basic necessities of life.

The aversion to democratic politics among the younger media personnel has been also fueled by the curriculum they have studied both in public and private educational institutions. Pakistani textbooks offer almost nothing on how and why a stable and strong democracy has never evolved in Pakistan. On the other hand, these same books are full of stories about how the ineptitude, fickleness and corruption among the political class have hurt the country since the start. The birth of a pro-democracy news media in Pakistan, therefore, cannot be ensured without first changing the school and college curricula and the education system in the country.

By deciding to do what the military establishment needed in and after 2010, most parts of the news media in Pakistan rather voluntarily started withdrawing from reporting on many issues close to the heart of the security and intelligence agencies. These included the phenomenon of missing persons, particularly those who were disappearing from Balochistan, military operations in various parts of the county's northwest and the involvement of security and intelligence agencies in civilian affairs, including electoral politics. Four instances that illustrate this trend are closely linked to each other and all of them occurred consecutively over an 18-month period between January 2011 and June 2012.

The first of these was the murder of two Pakistani citizens at the hands of an American security contactor, Raymond Davis, in Lahore in the first month of 2011. Davis was allowed to leave Pakistan around two months later after compensation was paid to the families of his victim. The second was a cross-border assault in November the same year by American troops posted in Afghanistan on a Pakistani check post in Mohmand tribal district. The attack resulted in the death of 28 Pakistan soldiers. The third, and perhaps the most important of the four, was the assassination of al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in a house near the military's premier training academy in Abbottabad in May 2012. The assassination was carried out by American marines who flew hundreds of kilometers inside Pakistan ostensibly without the knowledge of Pakistani authorities. The last was an alleged memo sent to an American general after bin Laden's death by Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's then ambassador in Washington, seeking support for the civilian government against a possible military takeover of power in Pakistan. The media used the four incidents to fan an anti-America sentiment across Pakistan<sup>39</sup> and, at the same time, vilify the civilian government as a Washington stooge and a security risk. There was hardly any probe or critique of the close collaboration between the Pakistani military and the United States that started in the early days of Pakistan and was still continuing at the time of all the incidents mentioned above.

Nor was there any investigation in Pakistani news media as to why and how bin Laden, designated as a terrorist by the United Nations, could stay ostensibly for years right next to a sensitive military

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/world/asia/in-pakistani-media-the-us-is-a-target-for-acrimony.html>

site. Similarly, details emerged only in 2017 on how the security and intelligence agencies played a major role in making the departure of Davis from Pakistan possible<sup>40</sup>. The cross-border attack in Mohmand, on the other hand, was covered by Pakistani news media in such a way that its coverage triggered a spate of arson attacks on trucks that carried supplies to foreign troops based in Afghanistan. Some of these attacks were justified by many media commentators as a manifestation of popular anti-American anger on the streets of Pakistan. There, however, was no mention in the media coverage of the fact that a subsidiary of the Pakistani military, National Logistics Cell (NLC), was as the sole purveyor of transport for the passage of those supplies to Afghanistan<sup>41</sup>. When stories emerged about the use of those supplies for the smuggling of consumer goods and transportation of contrabands including arms and ammunition, reporters and talk show hosts never felt it necessary to mention, let alone question, the role of NLC's senior officials in the whole affair.

A couple of years later, the news media did another major disservice to the cause of democracy in Pakistan when it provided 24/7 live coverage to a many month-long sit-in by Imran Khan and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). This overdrive could not be justified by any stretch of journalistic principles. Nor was it the only – or even the biggest or the most important – development at that time in Pakistan. Clearly, both the scale and the mostly pro-PTI tilt of the coverage were being prompted by something other than the need to keep people of Pakistan informed. “News media has facilitated non-democratic forces which curb individual and collective rights of people,” says Dr Jabbar Khattak.

## The rat race

It was a committee comprising three top Pakistani editors that advised the government in 1949 to ban *Civil and Military Gazette* for reporting that India and Pakistan were working towards resolving their dispute over Kashmir. The editors included Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who was the editor of *Pakistan Times*, Altaf Husain, the editor of *Dawn*, and Hamid Nazami, the editor of *Nawa-i-Waqt*<sup>42</sup>.

The news media's ongoing – and uncritical – support to the security and intelligence agencies on national security issues – such as Kashmir, Afghanistan and relations with India, China, United States and many Arab states – thus has antecedents that go as far back as Pakistan's origin as an independent state. What else has endured since then is the competition between Pakistani news media outlets. This competition has always been intense. Daily *Jang*'s success in Karachi, for instance, gave rise to its multiple competitors – including *Hurriyat* and *Aman* – which tried synonyms and antonyms of *Jang*'s title and its homegrown mix of political news, social and cultural commentary and showbiz and business reporting to compete with it. The publishers of *Dawn* not just financed *Hurriyat*, they also started *Herald* to compete with Jang Group's English

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/213516-Gen-Pasha-most-helpful-in-my-release-Raymond>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/608719-smuggling-goes-on-through-nato%E2%80%99s-nlc-containers-sc>

<sup>42</sup> Zamir, Niazi. (1986), *Press In Chains*, Royal Book Company, Karachi

weekly *Mag* and launched an evening newspaper, *Star*, for the same audience that Jang Group's eveningner, *Daily News*, catered to. Similarly, almost every English newspaper in Pakistan, with the exception of *Pakistan Times*, started its life as a claimant to grab a part of *Dawn*'s large audience.

Competition remains healthy as long as it provides news audience multiple choices. The problem occurs when it degenerates into a war of attrition. That was first witnessed in Karachi in the 1950s and 1960s when various Urdu dailies vied to get the largest audience share in that city. It spread to other parts of the country when *Jang* started its Lahore edition in the 1980s. The newspaper's main competitor in its new turf, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, immediately engaged it in a highly publicized war over circulation data. The two newspapers would also invest a lot of time and effort in falsifying each other's news reports.

By the 1990s, this competition came to involve multiple Lahore-based newspapers which all claimed to have a circulation higher than everyone else and a cache of exclusive stories much larger and more authentic than all others. It was also during this period that newspapers started shamelessly patting themselves on the back. Every now and then each newspaper claimed to have broken a news story or foretold a political development earlier than others. Then onwards, a good media outlet -- or a good journalist -- would be the one that could make correct political predictions rather than digging undisclosed information and illuminating news analysis.

Soon afterwards, another type of completion crept in. *Daily Din*, an Urdu language newspaper published from Lahore by the owner of a chain of private commerce colleges, dropped its cover price so low that all other newspapers started losing their circulation to it. Jang Group was so chafed that it eventually brought out daily *Awaz*, a low-priced daily of its own.

Private news channels picked up the race for audience numbers from newspapers but then they turned into a vulgar art form. Each major television channel has been found to be gloating over the financial, judicial or even journalistic miseries of its competitors. More worryingly, all of them have tried to attract audiences with the ways and means that leave a lot to be desired as far as journalistic ethics are concerned. "One of the biggest problem that television news has is that it focuses more on opinion driven talk shows than on producing news packages and documentaries," is how senior journalist Quatrina Hosain comments on this state of affairs. "Opinion has replaced facts and journalism has become lazy."

Every news channel, in fact, runs more than one talk show each day. Adnan Rehmat cites PEMRA's data to point out that "there are 147 talk shows" on Pakistani television channels. Many of the 147 news anchors who run these shows, according to him, are not even journalists. "They are lateral entrants. They did not practice journalism before they became the face of the news media."



Besides running similar looking and similar sounding talk shows, broadcast outlets do anything they can to beat the competition, including scandal mongering, releasing fake news and indulging in outright lies. Their competition, in the words of Farzana Ali, a journalist based in Peshawar, “has affected the quality of news negatively”. The relentless rivalry among the news media houses is making their diction coarser by the day and turning their graphics flashier and tackier. Not so long ago, each one of them tried to pull one up against others in using film music as background to news stories. That practice, mercifully, has now been abolished.

Nobody in the media, however, is sure if these tactics really work to keep the audiences engaged. In fact, there is a lot of debate among the analysts of Pakistani news media over how the audience size is measured for print as well as for broadcast journalism. In the former’s case, a federal government agency, Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), certifies as to how many copies each issue of a newspaper or a magazine sells<sup>43</sup>. These figures are neither updated regularly nor are they verifiable. Every newspaper and magazine has ABC circulation figures that far exceed the actual number of its copies sold. These exaggerated numbers are important since these form the basis for the distribution of government advertisements among newspapers and magazines.

The government seems to be happy living with this fiction since these false numbers gives it a helpful tool to withdraw ads from a publication when it so desires (as the PTI government is doing with Jang Group publications as well as with Dawn Media Group) or give hidden subsidies to its favorite publications (as the previous government did for the same two media houses). Consequently, owners of news publications more often than not strive hard to remain on the right side of the authorities that distribute official advertisements. To do so, almost every media house has been reported to have imposed some kind of a self-censorship on its publications if and when so required<sup>44</sup>. As long as a publication benefits from the highly flawed system of circulation counting, it never questions the numbers but whenever it falls foul of the authorities, it wastes little time before portraying itself as the victims of a highly selective and discriminatory circulation mechanism. In several cases, the authorities have used dummy ABC data to finance media houses and journalists<sup>45</sup> who were then deployed for disseminating false news, disinformation and propaganda. Many of the dummy papers, alleges Saleem Shahid, have provided “business cards to their employees, telling them go out in the field” posing as reporters and “earn money for themselves as well as their employers” by blackmailing people.

Television channels have a different audience measurement system. It is essentially a sample viewership survey of around 1200 households – a vast majority of them being in the three metropolises of Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi/Islamabad. This survey is conducted through

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1095515>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.apc.org/en/news/self-censorship-pakistani-media>

<sup>45</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/852675/13-pakistani-newspapers-you-have-probably-never-heard-of/>

digital meters attached to television sets and is overseen by Media Logic, a company jointly bankrolled by the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) and the Pakistan Advertisers Associations. Over time, there have been quite a few debates and controversies involving this system. For one, many commentators and analysts have pointed out that these digital surveys do not accurately measure television audiences and, therefore, should not be used as a criterion for distributing government and private sector ads among television channels<sup>46</sup>. In a couple of cases, television channels have tried to bribe the survey respondents to get better viewership ratings<sup>47</sup>.

But, unlike newspapers which are not bound by their circulation figures while deciding which areas, communities and subjects to cover and which ones to leave out, television's rating system has started a race to the bottom as far as catering to the areas and communities rich in survey respondents is concerned. People and places which are rural and less-prosperous and, therefore, less likely to buy consumer goods seldom, if at all, get coverage by news channels<sup>48</sup>. Nor are their issues and problems covered as much as the issues and problems of urban, prosperous and well-connected communities and localities are covered – unless, of course, a disaster strikes them or they attract some seriously negative attention. “Numbers have taken over content,” Sahar Baloch sums it all up pithily. “Journalists should not be focused on how much viewers a story is attracting because that is not what journalism is all about. It is about content.”

Certainly, it is a serious problem when television channels do not cover a well-deserved subject or a marginalized group of people but much bigger problems arise from what broadcast media does cover. Firstly, journalistic principles of accuracy and verifiability are immediately thrown out the window in the race to break a news story before everyone else. The same is done with the ethical requirements of being fair and showing no malice to anyone. For television reporters and talk show hosts, every allegation is already a proven fact. In a 180-degree reversal of a universally acknowledged legal dictum, they declare everyone guilty until the guilty can somehow prove themselves as innocence. Shrill repetitions and banal generalizations are used in almost every news report to give it a false intensity. Innuendo, sarcasm and an inquisitorial tone are staples in talk shows, press conferences and interviews.

In print journalism, these are the attributes of a special category of publications. These are practiced by tabloids and by newspapers and magazines often known to be doing what in our part of the world is known as yellow – or scandalizing -- journalism. In news television, there is only category one gets (except some rare exceptions). All the television channels use the same formula of jazzing up the news contents with artificial environmental effects. This formula, indeed, worked

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<sup>46</sup> Baig, Asad & Cheema, Umar. (2014-15), Broadcast Journalism in Pakistan: A Hostage to Media Economics, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, <http://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Broadcast-Media-in-Pakistan-Hostage-to-Media-Economy.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1205692>

<sup>48</sup> Baig, Asad & Cheema, Umar. (2014-15), Broadcast Journalism in Pakistan: A Hostage to Media Economics, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, <http://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Broadcast-Media-in-Pakistan-Hostage-to-Media-Economy.pdf>

for some years mainly because of its novelty value but now it has reached its limits: both its practitioners and consumers have tired of it. The former admittedly can do nothing better because the owners of media houses are disinclined to invest in investigative reporting as well as in training their staff in globally accepted professional and technical standards.

The latter, however, have the option of not watching what they do not like. And they are increasingly doing so as is obvious from the data that shows that the audiences of news television are shrinking<sup>49</sup>. More and more people are either watching non-news television or are spending their time on handheld communication devices such as tablets and smart phones (more of which later).

### It's the money, stupid

Every time Jang Group and Nawa-i-Waqt Group publish special editions of their newspapers on the death anniversaries of their founders, their publications carry multiple photos of Mir Khalil-ur-Rahman<sup>50</sup> and Hameed Nizami<sup>51</sup> respectively. Most of these photos show the two gentlemen in the company of the famous and the powerful – of both domestic and foreign varieties. They are shown shaking hands and meetings with freedom fighters, presidents, prime ministers, ambassadors, businessmen and other members of the Pakistani and international elite of their time.

These images are an incontrovertible evidence of the access to the corridors of power and influence that the founders of the two media houses enjoyed. They also show that, apart from doing public service and making money through their publications, the two press barons wanted to be known and seen while they were with the high and the mighty.

To be fair, being influential – or aspiring to be influential -- is a part and parcel of being in the news media. At least this is how media-persons are seen in public imagination: That they have access to those people and places whom others see as inaccessible; that because of the access they enjoy, they have information that others do not; that because of the access and the information they have, they can influence the choices and decisions that the important and the powerful make.

Within a Pakistani context, the first generation of news publishers, reporters and editors showcased its influence to prove that it was an essential part of the ruling class. Being present at moments of historic national importance and contributing to the making of decisions and policies that determined the future course of the country was their way of showing and feeling their own importance. This is not to suggest that all of them always acted like selfless nation builders who could not care less about their personal interests. Some of them certainly did always seek what they saw as the greater public good. They stood up to tyranny, opposed dictatorships and became

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<sup>49</sup> <https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143363>

<sup>50</sup> <https://jang.com.pk/thenews/spedition/mkr/mir2005.htm>

<sup>51</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/25-Feb-2012/patron-of-muslim-ideology>

the voice of the voiceless, the poor and the marginalized. Their businesses suffered. They themselves faced fines and imprisonments. Yet, they did not submit to the dictates of money and power.

Many others sought, and received, financial support from governments, curried favor with the resourceful who could help their businesses prosper and established lifelong connections that would entrench them in power circles even further. All said, they were all media-persons -- first and foremost -- and anything else later and their business outlets are still regarded as legacy media in the country. Their commercial and financial interests, too, were limited to their publications -- mostly if not entirely. When at its best, the journalism they produced sought to achieve a balance between making profit and maintaining the editorial independence of their publications. Often, though, this balance was conspicuous by its absence.

A large part of the second generation that emerged in the 1980s comprised the sons and nephews of the legacy media founders -- Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman of Jang Group, Hameed Haroon of Dawn Group and Arif Nizami of Nawa-i-Waqt Group being the most eminent among them. Others came to the business of news after having made their money somewhere else. They used their publications to gain access to power which they would, in turn, mobilize to protect and promote their non-news financial interests. They were never really serious about making their news ventures profitable because they sought to profit from other activities. The owners of *The Muslim*, an English-language daily based in Islamabad<sup>52</sup>, and *Frontier Post* that had its headquarters in Peshawar<sup>53</sup>, were only the most obvious exhibits of this breed of news publishers.

Being free from financial constraints, their editorial contents almost always spoke harsh truth to those in authority. It was not an easy task given that Pakistan was under the martial rule of General Zia who brooked little opposition and challenge to his power and policies. He had already throttled almost all the politically affiliated newspapers and magazines started a few years earlier during the heyday of anti-Ayub popular movement. Other mainstream news publications, too, submitted themselves to his censors since they dreaded losing government ads.

In the early 1990s, several new media houses came about under the stewardship of several senior and influential journalists. In each case, these were funded behind the scenes by some newly risen businessmen and/or aspirants to political office. Their editors-publishers would use their journalistic output as well as editorial clout to advance the financial interests of their secret benefactors. A few of these editors-publishers would later become the founders of their own media houses. Khabrain Group is Exhibit A of this phenomenon<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.journalismpakistan.com/news-detail.php?newsid=27>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03064229108535029?needAccess=true&journalCode=rioc20>

<sup>54</sup> <https://pakistan.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/individual-owners/detail/owner/owner/show/the-zia-shahid-family/>

Journalists who worked with these media organizations also helped their bosses make money – and then some more -- paying little heed to such niceties as facts, contextualization and verifiability. They pandered to the popular, instigated public rage over religious and cultural issues and publicly insulted and humiliated those who would not oblige them. Stories of petty blackmailing by their staff – as well as their editors and owners -- are now legion.

The third, and the latest, generation of media owners lunched news outlets after having established themselves in other businesses. They started publishing newspapers and running television channels because they needed clout within the state and the society to shield their already sizeable business operations from any adverse government policies and actions. Many of them had made their millions in cash-heavy businesses such as education, real estate and consumer goods. They sought to legalize their largely non-taxed earnings by investing them in the business of news which, due to the political salience of its output, could help them avoid a financial scrutiny of their business activities.

This new variety of media owners has admittedly contributed to a visible improvement in the working conditions and wages of a select group of much sought after talk show hosts, newsreaders, reporters and newsroom managers. They have similarly invested large sums in modernizing newsrooms and reporting desks and diversifying the news business by launching television channels and radio stations alongside newspapers and magazines. They have also led the course for discarding the news media's older business model that, for the most part, relied more on curating, editing and disseminating news and relatively less on marketing it to audiences and advertisers. The new model is exclusively focused on producing news that can be somehow monetized. It hates to see journalism as a public service profession and regard the news media as a watchdog of public interest. All that has been left to a few idealists.

“Objectivity has decreased whereas subjectivity has increased in news coverage,” says Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan, a senior Karachi-based teacher of journalism. “Personal interests and benefits of reporters, editors and owners are supreme and are depicted as such in news media.” Consequently, the idea of editorial independence has become as alien to Pakistani media outlets as the concept of fact checking is to a salesperson. “Non-professional owners have hired non-professional staff that is why journalistic output has deteriorated,” argued Saleem Shahid, a senior reporter based in Quetta.

## **Workers of the world**

Press is the only sector of Pakistan's economy where the government determines the wages of all employees. This determination is done by a wage board headed by a government-designated high court judge who consults the representatives of newspaper employers and employees<sup>55</sup>. The first

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<sup>55</sup> <http://zafarahmedku06.tripod.com/>

wage board award was set up in 1960. Since then only eight awards have been announced though their actual number should have been 12 given that a fresh wage board award must be announced five year after the previous one. The 8<sup>th</sup> wage board award was announced in December 2019, a good 18 years after the 7<sup>th</sup> award<sup>56</sup> which was subjected to a decade-long battle in courts before it attained finality in 2011<sup>57</sup>. Yet, at least one publication was resisting its implementation even in 2018<sup>58</sup>.

Even in the presence of wage board, salaries in newspapers were so small that, to quote Ayaz Khan, that “many journalists could not afford even a full set of tea at office”.

The resistance by the owners of news publications to implement the 7<sup>th</sup> wage board award coincided with large scale changes in the new media sector in particular and Pakistan’s economy in general. The latter moved almost entirely into a deregulated mode and the former entered the electronic and digital age in one big stride. The newly set up private television channels, radio stations and news websites had many more employees than newspapers and magazines ever did but the wage board award system did not apply to any of the staffers of these new outlets. On the other hand, says Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan, “a new system of contract employment and employment through third parties” has been adopted in Pakistani news media “over the last 19 years”.

This contract system offer no job security, says Amber Rahim Shamsi. “Many news media outlet are run by *seths* – or individual proprietors. These *seths* have the sole prerogative of hiring and firing the staff. There is no check on their power.”

Meanwhile, to resist the payment of decent salaries to print journalists, the owners of media houses went to courts, met highest authorities in the land and ran a vociferous ad campaign to have the entire wage board system abolished<sup>59</sup>. They argued that television channels in particular and electronic and digital news media outlets in general were offering higher salaries than those in newspapers and magazines because these were being determined by the market forces of demand and supply and not by a government-devised system. The fact of the matter is that the market-driven salaries were as eccentric as market economy in Pakistan is. “Wages were decided more on the basis of whims than merit,” says Faizullah Jan.

While a select group of talk show hosts and news directors have been getting monthly salaries in millions of rupees, most other workers of television channels and news websites, indeed, do not get salaries that wage board award has determined for their counterparts working in the print media. As Adil Shahzeb, the host of a political talk show, puts it: “You have to divide journalists

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<sup>56</sup> <http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdf-files/Seventh%20vage%20award%20-%206.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/277996/7th-wage-board-award-sc-announces-verdict-in-favour-of-journalists/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1624386/1-sc-upholds-ihc-decision-implementation-awards/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.pakistanpressfoundation.org/apns-drive-against-7th-wage-award/>

into two categories as far as their salaries are concerned. One category is that of anchors. They are well paid. They are getting salaries almost equivalent to international standards. In the second category are reporters who I think are underpaid.”

Even when their take home salaries seem bigger than those in newspapers and magazines, they have lost many other benefits -- such as provident fund/gratuity, earned leaves and healthcare expenses – in the bargain.

In any case, the argument that the wages of media workers should be left to market forces is misplaced on two major counts: firstly, it assumes that the market for news media will always do well and will thus guarantee a perpetual rise in salaries; secondly, it takes for granted that the nature of the media market will not change in the foreseeable future.

The news media in Pakistan, indeed, started facing a contraction due to a deterioration in economic growth rates in 2007-08. As private advertising decreased due to a sluggish economic activity, the reliance on government advertising (that had remained considerably low in 2003-07) started growing again.

But, unlike in the past, there were far more claimants for government ads than there were till the 1990s. These ads on their own were, thus, insufficient to sustain the entire news media sector – populated by hundreds of newspapers, scores of television channels, dozens of news websites and several hundred radio stations. Consequently, a scramble began for them and, predictably, the news media houses which enjoyed greater access to high authorities were more successful than others in this endeavor. This proximity to power, or the lack of it, explains why Dawn Group and Jang Group have been particularly facing a squeeze in their revenues since Imran Khan came to power in August 2018<sup>60</sup>. His government has publicly accused to two groups of being close to the party of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and resultantly having garner far more ad revenue in comparison with other media houses during 2013-18<sup>61</sup>.

On the whole, financial situation at many news media houses has become so bad that many of them are either not paying their employees regularly or have cut their wages by as much as 40 per cent<sup>62</sup>. In Aamir Ghauri’s estimate, several news outlets are “running five to six months behind their payment schedule”.

Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan claims that working conditions for journalists are worsening day by day. “While, on the one hand, older employees are being shown the door, newer ones are being recruited on subsistence salaries.”

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<sup>60</sup> Jamal, Nasir. (2018), Cost cuts in media, Dawn, Nov 19, [<https://www.dawn.com/news/1446393>

<sup>61</sup> [<https://www.dawn.com/news/1429866>]

<sup>62</sup> Journalism Pakistan. 2019, Dawn slaps 40 percent cut in staff wages, January 30, [www.journalismpakistan.com](http://www.journalismpakistan.com), [<https://www.journalismpakistan.com/dawn-slaps-40-percent-cut-in-staff-wages>]

Several media outlets have gone to the extent of shutting down their platforms and sending workers home<sup>63</sup>. One estimate puts the number of media workers rendered jobless since 2018 at 3000. “There is a sense of insecurity among journalists,” says Myra Imran, a newspaper reporter working in Islamabad. “How well can you do reporting in this kind of atmosphere?”

Simultaneously, technology has been introducing irreversible changes in the news media business since 2010. Print and broadcast technologies have been complemented and supplanted by the digital ones<sup>64</sup>. This has had a profound impact on the way news is produced consumed. “With the introduction of information technology, journalism has become faster,” says Dr Erfan Aziz. “More content and information started getting shared than before.”

Smart phones and other handheld devices that support internet and video streaming have gone a step even further. They have freed news audiences from the need to be educated – something they required to read newspapers – and stationary (to be able to watch television within their homes). The news content has become available literally on the go now. The statistics back this up. The total number of print publications in Pakistan declined drastically – from 1039 in 2009 to 695 in 2018<sup>65</sup>. For the last several years, the percentage of television audience watching television has been going down<sup>66</sup>.

Both the news audiences and advertisers, resultantly, started shifting to online platforms, making a bad economic situation worse for Pakistani news media. This worsening situation, in turn, has contributed to a further downward slide in wages, employment and quality of output in every media outlet – whether it is a newspaper, a television channel or a news website.

Personal safety of journalists is another aspect that has deteriorated since 2002 – and not just because of a bad law and order and violent conflicts that have hit Pakistan over all these years. The spread of news audience and news procurement operations to those areas which, till the late 1990s, did not have any presence of the news media – except, of course, radio – has exposed journalists to immediate reactions and responses to their news output within their own far flung locations. Working hundreds of kilometers away from the headquarters of their media outlet, they have been on their own to protect themselves against such local reactions and response. In a few notable cases, journalists have also got caught in a fight between the security forces and various types of militant organizations and in some others they have become victims of the violence perpetrated by the security and intelligence agencies themselves. “Many serious journalists have taken asylum in

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<sup>63</sup> Hasan, Saad. (2018), *Why are so many Pakistani journalists losing their jobs?* TRT World, Nov 30, [<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-are-so-many-pakistani-journalists-losing-their-jobs-22094>]

<sup>64</sup> DW. (2019), *Pakistan's media on the brink of a digital transition, but struggling to find viable business models*, April 9, [<https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-media-on-the-brink-of-a-digital-transition-but-struggling-to-find-viable-business-models/a-47922005>]

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/tables/Newspapers%20and%20Periodicals%20by%20Province.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> <https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143363>



other countries due to threats to their safety, says Wajahat Masood, a newspaper columnist and the editor of an online news platform in Lahore.

Between 2000 and 2012, the era that mostly coincided with the global war on terrorism, as many as 90 journalists lost their lives in different parts of Pakistan, making the country third most dangerous place in the world to do journalism – behind only Somalia and Syria<sup>67</sup>. The same trend has continued over the last six years. Many journalists have been injured and at least 33 of them have been killed in various incidents of violence between 2013 and 2019<sup>68</sup>. In Balochistan alone, according to Saleem Shahid, almost 50 journalists were killed in just a few last years. But, as Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan points out, only in only one case were the murders punished. “In most other cases, the alleged murders were not even been arrested, let alone investigated and prosecuted.”

## The worst of times

It is easy to conclude from the narrative above that whatever changes have taken place in the Pakistani news media are, indeed, changes of degree and scale. The overall situation of the sector has never been ideal though all the problems it has experienced since the beginning have either become worse or have been compounded because of the involvement of new factors such as social, economic and technological changes.

To being with, the quality of journalism in Pakistan has never been great. Of course, there have been some shining examples of the courage to speak the truth to power and holding the powerful to account but, by and large, the press in Pakistan has been either driven by competing political ideologies or by profit-making. Very rarely has it been focused on investigative reporting and informed, evidence-based analysis. Today, the competing camps of leftist and rightist thinking have disappeared and have been supplanted mostly either by a state-sponsored propaganda or a market-driven sensationalism and banality. The profit motive is front and center in the media’s output and whatever little investigative reporting there was in the past has disappeared altogether. As a result, the quality of journalism has gone further down – admittedly from an already low place. The “speedy growth” of electronic and digital media platform in the recent past, explains Adil Shahzeb, “indeed started with low quality journalism characteristics”.

But Dr Seemi Naghmana, a teacher of mass communication in Karachi, believes that analysts who decry the low quality of today’s journalism miss an import factor. “Electronic media has a history of roughly 20 years. It is a short span of time to build standards especially in a country where education is not quite widespread and people lack a sense of critical thinking,” she says.

A similar lack of experience is discernible when it comes to the level of professional skills among contemporary journalists. Most of them have university degrees in media studies, mass

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/765310/over-90-journalists-killed-in-pakistan-since-2000>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514131>

communications and journalism but they have not yet matured their skills through learning by doing. In contrast, the first generation of journalists in the country comprised almost entirely of self-motivated, social and political do-gooders who, in most cases, did not have college or university education. Though the second generation included a much higher number of university graduates but, barring a few exceptions, they were all trained in disciplines other than journalism.

The technical knowhow among the third, and the latest, generation of journalists and the relevance of their academic qualification to their assignments are far higher than what was the case for their predecessors. They have a greater ability to deal with technology, says Syed Talat Hussain. “There are journalists who are essentially a one man army. They use their own camera, have their own production staff and can post news online on their own.”

This, however, has not translated in an improvement in the quality of their output. According to Aamir Ghauri, this owes to the fact that the new journalism departments that opened in every university were still teaching the same old courses. “They all copy pasted courses taken from older teachers who had never worked in television or print media but knew only theory,” he says. Since teachers and courses were not good, the product which they sent to the market was also not good.” There is also a bigger reason which, too, is linked to what these graduates studied. Their studies were narrowly focused on journalism and did not equipped them with the intellectual wherewithal to understand and analyze the complexities and nuances of cultural, political and economic context of their own work. “Critical faculties have not developed among youngsters so that they can differentiate between what is right and what is wrong. They are confused,” says Rashid Rehman, a former newspaper editor living in Lahore.

A similar departure from the past can be seen in the influence and credibility of journalism and journalists. In the earliest years after the independence, senior editors -- like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Hameed Nizami and Altaf Husain – enjoyed high levels of influence in political and social circles. Similarly, news publication such as *Dawn*, *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *Jang* were treated by their faithful followers – and there were many hundred thousand such followers for each of these publications -- as gold standard in telling the truth. In each of the three decade after the 1940s, journalists were also at the forefront of the fight against military dictatorships. Many of them suffered severe hardships for the courage of their conviction – including fines, imprisonments and the loss of livelihood.

The editors, reporters and publications that succeeded the pioneers did not have the iconic status of their predecessors but their views mattered to the extent that some reporters and newspaper columnists still take credit for getting officers, ministers and even the whole governments sacked in the 1990s. Their credibility was questioned much later -- only after historians and analysts of Pakistani state and society unearthed many instances of complicity between the military establishment, the judiciary and the press between the late 1970s and the late 1990s. Even this

unearthing does not diminish the influence that some journalists enjoyed in those years. If anything, it only underscores the fact that the extent of their influence was so great that they had a decisive role in the power politics of the day.

Towards the end of this era, journalism became a byword for blackmail in many parts of the country – partly because of the editor-owners who were willing to cut every ethical corner to make a quick buck and partly due to the shenanigans of local correspondents who made money by suppressing news from their districts than they could by publishing it. Motorcycles and cars carrying number plates with the word ‘PRESS’ writ large on them were ubiquitous in every major city and town of the country. There were many more of such vehicles than there were journalists around since merely identifying oneself as a journalist was seen as a license to bypass, even break, traffic laws and many other government regulations.

The current crop started off well. Initially, they were seen by many as the watchdogs of public interests. The voiceless and the marginalized saw them as messiahs who could shake the high and the mighty into addressing their problems. As news television moved inside every home, those in power could ignore its reporting and commentary only at their own expense. Before 2010, the news media had become so influential that it arguably made a decisive contribution in Musharraf’s departure from power.

“Talk shows hosts specifically had a lot of influence. Their impact was similar to the impact that newspapers used to have over certain powerful urban elite in Pakistan,” says Amber Rahim Shamsi. Even street vendors and donkey cart owners, according to Adil Shahzeb, would quote talk show hosts “Hamid Mir and Kashif Abbasi etc. in their discussions on politics”.

Some talk show hosts became so influential that their audiences took every word they spoke as nothing but truth. If a talk show host said something or someone was bad, his or her entire audience started immediately treating that something or someone as bad, says Aamir Ghauri. “This only sharpened the political divisions in the country.”

Since then, however, its influence has waned to the extent that journalists are now seen more as a part of Pakistan’s cultural, political and economic problems than being regarded as part of the solutions. “We have lost the trust of people...They believe we are working for a specific agenda,” says Farzana Ali. “That is why people pay no attention to us.”

There are two major reasons for this. Firstly, the self-censorship imposed by the news media owners to protect and promote their commercial interests<sup>69</sup> has made many parts of the national life no go areas for reporting and analysis. These include, but are not limited to, religion, big business, courts and security and intelligence agencies. “News media has benefited by helping big businessmen’s anti-consumer policies,” argues Dr Jabbar Khattak.

Secondly, the censorship imposed from the outside has made more areas – such as relations with countries like Saudi Arabia and China, human rights abuses including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, civil-military relations, instances of corruption and misuse of power within the armed forces etc. – inaccessible for journalism.

“Managements have been forced to run media houses under the directions given by the state,” says Rashid Rehman. “This kind of censorship is not expected even under a dictatorship,” he observes. “There is direct intervention in newsrooms and everything is being monitored. Mute buttons have been installed to censor live transmissions. Every telecast, indeed, is time delayed.”

These restrictions, argues I A Rehman, clearly suggest that the state is provide any space to the media. “If the state decides to not listen to anyone including the media, what effect will the media then have?”

As a consequence of this shrunken space for the media, reporters and analysts now operate in a narrow band of topics. “At the moment,” says Sahar Baloch, who is working as a reporter with an international broadcaster, “the focus is more on soft stories than on investigative reporting.” If and when journalists do ‘hard’ stories, they are mostly going after civilian officials of the government and elected politicians.

Amber Rahim Shamsi has something similar to say about the subjects being covered by the news media. “We have far too many television channels relying on current affairs panels, talk shows, political programming and lighter shows.”

Even while covering politics, journalists and news media houses fail to hide their biases. Pakistani journalism, in fact, is divided along party lines and this division is impinging negatively on both its credibility and influence. “Journalists have become spokespersons of political parties and other organizations,” says Ayaz Khan. As a result, the idea of conveying ‘news as it happen’ has suffered badly. Journalists now incorporate their own views and opinion in news reports.”

The audiences take very little time to put two and two together. As soon as a journalist loses his reputation as a non-partisan and fair observer, recorder and interpreter, says Ayaz Khan, he is no longer seen as a journalist. In a worst case scenario, he or she becomes a butt of public criticism.

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<sup>69</sup> Baig, Asad & Cheema, Umar. (2014-15), Broadcast Journalism in Pakistan: A Hostage to Media Economics, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, <http://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Broadcast-Media-in-Pakistan-Hostage-to-Media-Economy.pdf>

“If the supporters of a party perceive you as an opponent, they will troll you and call you a *lifafa* journalist,” says Adil Shahzeb.

Saleem Shahid has something similar to say though in a different context. “When a government official is informed that a journalist is coming to see him, he just shuts the door of his office” to convey to the journalist that he is not welcome. This loss of face has happened because every journalist is using his or her influential contacts for personal gains, he says. “So the officer believes that the journalist is not coming to him for news but for some personal reason.”

Obviously, the news media’s influence and credibility go hand in hand. So, as Syed Talat Hussain explains, “your credibility is tested every day if your influence is defined by it.” You can no longer take your credibility for granted, he says. “So you have to be very careful about your credibility if you enjoy a high impact and a strong access to political forums. Once your credibility drops, people don’t even look at you. They remember you as a journalist who misled them.”

Out of all the factors responsible for a decrease in the influence of journalists and journalism, the relentless growth of commercialism seems to have contributed the most to a near total absence of investigative reporting and independent analysis from the news media of today. The owners of most media houses are unwilling to risk their money to help journalists find and report the truth. They are not ready to pay the price for the freedom of expression of their employees. In Adnan Rehmat’s words: “Professionalism won for a few years after 2002 but then market forces took over and advertisement and marketing departments of media houses prevailed, saying they needed sensationalism and hype to get more ads.” He adds: “Even if I am well trained as a journalist, when I go back to my newsroom I am prevented from doing good journalism because my bosses want sensationalism so they do not care carrying my work.”

This was not the case in the 1950s through to the 1970s when most reporters, many editors and a few publishers too would willingly take financial hits if their conscience so directed them. But it started changing in the 1980s and became almost irreversible with the arrival of news television. This change for the worse can be put to the fact that news business did not involve huge amounts of money in the first three decades after the independence. The investment needed for bringing out a newspaper was small and the revenues that a publication could generate were also tiny. Financial stakes become much higher in the succeeding decades. New printing/publishing technologies were not cheap. Setting up a television required even larger amounts of money. In the meanwhile, the sources and the size of revenues also multiplied manifold.

Ironically, though, the enlarged news media revenues have not contributed to job security and improved working conditions for journalists. Wages were always small in Pakistani journalism

and the surety of tenure was scarce but the system of wage board awards gave journalists a forum where they could take their grievances and often also had them addressed. That system, a relic of the an industrial economy premised on mass production, appears not to be just out of sync with the knowledge-heavy economy of today, it is also applicable to only a fraction of the whole news media. As a result, income disparities among journalists working in different mediums as well as among those working on different posts within the same medium have multiplied. These inequalities, in turn, have weakened team work and professional camaraderie both within and across media outlets which is one of the main reasons why we do not see a strong collective action by journalists even when their wages and working conditions are deteriorating by the day.

Unsurprisingly, the perception that journalists indulge in financial corruption as much as any other section of the society – or perhaps even more – is quite widespread. The stories of corruption among journalists, indeed, have increased inexorably in the last three decades, seemingly in tandem with deterioration in the working conditions in Pakistani journalism and increase in the news media's geographical outreach. The word *lifafa* – or a parcel of money – has almost become synonymous with a journalist in today's Pakistan. Many journalists, indeed, are known to be receiving money and other benefits from a variety of benefactors though many others are being wrongly vilified by the powers that be and their professional enemies. They are being targeted perhaps because they still appear to be bent upon telling the truth.

And, lastly, violence and threats of violence against journalists have also increased in the recent times. “We have seen attacks on both journalists and news media houses,” says Kamal Siddiqi, a former newspaper editor in Karachi.

While in older times the state had a virtual monopoly over violence against journalists, currently all types of non-state actors – religious and ethnic militant groups, political parties, criminal gangs, radicalized mobs and organized professionals including doctors and lawyers – have tried, with varying degrees of success, to browbeat journalists into following their diktats. After 9/11, says Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan, these “non-state actors have made the life of Pakistani journalists very difficult”.

The state, meanwhile, has gone far beyond merely jailing critical journalists for brief periods of time. It now tries them under terrorism charges, carries out their enforced disappearances and, as has been seen in some well recorded cases, does not hesitate from beating them up and even killing them. Undoubtedly, journalism in Pakistan has never been as life-threatening a profession as it is these days.

It can thus be argued without any fear of refutation that these are the most difficult times to be a journalist in Pakistan. While job security and personal safety are no longer guaranteed, the credibility and influence that journalists of the old enjoyed has also disappeared. As also has the

confidence in the news media's ability to be the eyes and the ears of the public in the corridors of power. How much of this sorry state of affairs can be directly blamed on journalists themselves and how much of it is a result of changes in technology, economy, state and society is something that remains to be fully analyzed. If this monograph drops some helpful hints for other analysts, that will be more than what it has aimed at achieving.