

# Javed JABBAR

## **Pakistan ex-Information and Communication Minister (1999-2000)**

Pakistan in 2003 personifies paradoxes of the new and the old media, and of power and democracy. The country has an Army Chief of Staff, first as Head of Government from October 1999 to November 2002 and since then, as Head of State. In October 2002, general elections were held in which all political parties took part. Given some reservations, a reasonably free and fairly elected Parliament is in place. Through the past four years, Pakistan has witnessed phenomenal and progressive change in three fundamental respects that directly bear on the theme of the World Electronic Media Forum.

First: 2000 onwards, several private satellite TV channels began broadcasting without obstruction from outside Pakistan but with content originating from within the country. This was the result of a new law for private, independent, terrestrial electronic media, and rapid growth of cable TV distribution bringing dozens of overseas channels to low and middle income households, all of which have transformed the electronic media environment of Pakistan. There is now freely available on TV a wide range of candid political comment, educative information and colourful entertainment.

Since 14th February 1998, the Citizens' Media Commission of Pakistan regularly observes "Electronic Media Freedom Day". The observance of this day for the past six years has helped mobilize public support for the importance of freedom of expression in electronic media, and has catalyzed policy reform. It is strongly recommended that in line with World Press Freedom Day on 5 May, an appropriate day be chosen by the WEMF to be observed across the planet as: "World Electronic Media Freedom and Fairness Day". 14th February is a good option: by coincidence, it is also Valentine's Day!

Second: a vibrant free press in Pakistan continues to publish highly critical analysis of the role of the Armed Forces as well as offering a wide range of choice to readers. Third: the fastest expansion in South Asia of Internet access in the past four years has taken place in Pakistan through massive reduction in prices as well as speedy extension of telecommunication services, and steady growth in the number of cellular phones.

The ultimate paradox is that Pakistan today has far greater freedom of expression in old media and in access to new media than several other countries in Asia that are far more advanced, socially and economically, (e.g. Singapore and Malaysia). Further, the content of Pakistan's media expresses the rich pluralism and liberalism of its society, a facet that is rarely, or never projected in global media which obsessively concentrate only on violence, so-called 'jihad' and 'terrorism' to portray Pakistan as a hotbed of extremism.

Basic issues of constitutional amendments, concentration of power in the executive and the military rather than the legislature and the civilian sector do remain unresolved in Pakistan. As a country Pakistan ranks as only 144th out of 175 countries in the UNDP's human development index. This despite the fact that Pakistan has the world's seventh largest state in population and is one of only seven with nuclear weapons. Pakistan has also produced thousands of exceptionally talented and distinguished individuals. The Islamabad government is now challenging this ranking and the data on which it is based.

Perhaps these are the inevitable ironies of a historic transition to a new order --- and to new media! Pakistan is part of an exciting and volatile world. The information landscape shaped by the electronic media of the 20th century created a spectacular and unprecedented collective memory instantly shared by billions of people. Yet, even when public radio or talk radio or audiencebased TV programmes gave virtually every person, in theory, an opportunity to be famous for 15 seconds --- or 15 minutes! --- the transience of electronic media content, and low access, made this an illusion.

Concurrently, in the second half of the 20th century, a majority of nation-states adopted, for the first time, the principle of "one man/one woman/one vote". Nevertheless, just as the veto power of five states negates real

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democracy in the United Nations, so too does the power of corporate media and state media submerge and weaken individual communication rights. This is because community-based media are not encouraged to grow with the same force as corporate or state media.

Now, however, the new media hold the promise of authentic emancipation for all on this planet. The advent of new media is, in one context, helping to complete a historic circle. Each human being is the single most potent medium of communication, whether by voice, ear, tongue, hand, expression and movement. For recipient of content capable of changing the beliefs and behaviour of others, there is no better medium than a single human being.

From cave paintings to cuneiforms to calligraphy and, now to computers, the human being has demonstrated the extraordinary capacity for a single mind to become the core of communications. The status of the individual, with respect for personal rights and dignity, as being at the epicentre of the communications process, was displaced and down-graded by the pervasive growth of mass media in the 20th century. This was an era in which sheer numbers, volumes and masses driven by advertising, audience ratings, propaganda and profit assumed the highest priority in the communications cycle.

Now, the new media, supplemented by some of the more positive facets of the old, enable the possible restoration of the might and the majesty of each single human being as the king or the queen of communications. Whether this be through access to the Internet, cell phones or the inter-active conventional mass media, or the enormous proliferation of media choices. Ironically, these changes also give the audience the power to switch away or switch-off. We are already on the threshold of a new age in which each individual can originate media content, transmit content, receive content, adapt content or reject content altogether.

The fact that wireless technology has accelerated this process is an appropriate symbol of how the old wired media have been broken. The individual can now – once again – become as potentially free as from where he began his communication odyssey. Fortunately, the drawing of the full circle is not a return to a primitive condition. Instead, the new focus on the sole individual created by the new media promises real empowerment.

Yet, even with such expectations, there is a need for both caution and purposeful, collaborative action.

First: while acknowledging the enterprise and innovation of corporations, we must prevent greed from manipulating the new media. Second: we should strengthen new institutions of global civil society to serve as independent, non-coercive monitors of media content and enable accountability through social, nonofficial regulation. Third: while appreciating the quality and integrity of certain global media, we need to reduce the prevalent imbalance in global electronic media with more independent production originating from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Fourth: we need to deal with the disquieting question of whether media per se, genuinely empowers the citizen to the degree that he is able to change the structures of power that really control society, across the world, and within each country.

Finally, the capacity of the new information landscape to foster harmony, peace and justice has to be judged on its ability to reduce the gross disparities that still imprison over two billion people on our planet - or about one in every three human beings - in stark, painful poverty. These people have only their own voices as their private media. They hope that the old and new electronic media listen to them, and share the beautiful new world with them.