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*An External View of the Vernacular Press
in Pakistan*

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Hailing from a conflict ridden socio-political background in another neighbouring country – Sri Lanka, it was not much difficult for me to understand the trends and styles of Pakistani media fabric since both countries share many social, cultural and political dynamics. But in an honest note I must admit the fact that my attempt here is not to be a ‘pundit’ or a ‘master’ on Pakistani media and its present challenges. My ‘fact finding mission’ was just confined to mere two weeks in Islamabad, Peshawar and Karachi, apart from my frequent visits to Pakistan.

The main objective of my short research was to look into the professional standards of the vernacular print media in Pakistan. With logistical assistance of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) I monitored some vernacular daily publications in Islamabad and Peshawar, interviewed journalists, editors, publishers and some civil society activists. Thus, this short report would shed a light on the present status and challenges to the vernacular press in Pakistan along with some recommendations.

Background

Radicalised media has become an unshaken – if not growing - challenge within the highly militarised and volatile Pakistani society. Though relatively independent compared to some neighbouring countries in the South Asian region, Pakistani media – especially the regional vernacular press - is under influence and pressure from the militant groups, security forces as well as some political and economic interest groups. Experts cite numerous reasons for this phenomenon which would be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Pakistan’s 176 million people have access to a gamut of media products with 142 proper newspapers¹ (over 1000 a day if regional, religious and other forms of publications were also counted)², some 125 radio channels³ and more than 80 television (satellite) channels.⁴ Though half the society is illiterate (Even the official figure on literacy is 54%, this rate goes drastically low in the regions, mainly in the conflict areas), print media still believed to play in shaping the mindset of the society. Nevertheless, radio is the most practical and accessible mode of media in the less developed and illiterate regions.

Most interestingly, a survey by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies found that 69% of 16 journalists and editors thought that radicalisation was crippling freedom of expression. 50% found that the radical media had an impact on mainstream media, and 57 % thought that the media was concealing facts about radicalisation.⁵

The history of radicalisation of Pakistani media goes back to its era of independence where the pro-partition political movements commenced agenda driven newspapers in spreading their ‘radical messages’ across to the masses at large. Newspapers like Dawn (English) and Nawa-i-Waqt (Urdu) were established with specific agenda of supporting the concept of a Pakistan carved out from the Indian subcontinent. Since then Pakistani media, especially the vernacular press was a victim of many religio-political interest groups with different formations and agendas. According to Nawa-i-Waqt Resident Editor Javed Siddiq⁶ the objective of the establishment of his newspaper was an Islamic Republic of Pakistan. “So we have to be pro-Islamic and against any separatist movement in Pakistan. We are against any damage to the Islamic ideology, as well,” he said.

One of the major perpetrators in radicalising the country’s media has been the Pakistani government itself after the birth of new Pakistani nation. According to a revealing of an inquiry committee the Directorate of Information of the Government of Punjab has channelled funds to several newspapers that

had an anti-ideological view on Ahmadis with a view to counter and campaign against the latter with radical ideological approach.⁷

Thus, different actors from different theatres infiltrated media - especially the print media - in Pakistan, in different forms. This trend, according to Muhammad Azzam⁸, went to an extent where radical groups 'planted' their members within media systems.

However, the influence of interested parties or groups was not the only contributing factor for media to be radicalised. Several other factors were unearthed during a recent study carried out by this writer in Pakistan - especially in Islamabad, Peshawar and Karachi.

These contributing factors either directly result in radicalisation of media or directly affect professional standards which indirectly pave the way for media to be radicalised. A short research study on the news reporting standards and styles in the Urdu press was conducted by the author in July 2009 where these factors were analysed through monitoring several selected national and regional Urdu newspapers for a period of one week, interviews and a short literature survey. The monitoring of the leading news items in the Urdu language newspapers included a critical analysis on their reporting styles, adhering to basic principles of media ethics, language and diction used and the manner in which leading stories were treated in the report.

Thus, the following contributing factors were identified:

1. Influence by the Interest Parties

It was clear that either militant/extremist groups or the State entities directly or indirectly influence the media, especially the vernacular press. Since the ruling period of Gen Zia-ul-Haq penetration of militants or extremist activists into media has been taking place and - sometimes under State patronage. Senior journalist Mubashir Bokhari explains⁹ how Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) activists entered into media field for the purpose of propaganda during the Afghan War. This situation has developed to an extent where some radical/extremist groups are 'planting their own members' within the media system.

The other side of the situation is the direct influence by the security forces and the militants on media - mainly on the vernacular press. Also most of the regional Urdu newspapers are under influence/threat by extremist groups or the security forces, says Qasim Nawaz, a senior Urdu language journalist. "Mainly the Taliban groups victimize regional newspapers, especially in Peshawar and Swat. No anti-Taliban content could be published in this context," Nawaz says adding that the security forces are no different but not as bad as Taliban.

Muhammad Amir Rana views the new version of the militant media as a major influencing factor to the mainstream - especially to the Urdu media. "It (the new version of militant media) not only damaged the former's (the old version of religious media) image of 'serious religious publications' by playing a critical role in propagating militant ideologies in Pakistan but also induced a fatal blow to the professional ethics of Urdu mainstream media to a greater extent,"¹⁰ he says.

2. Competition

The extent of competition could be imaginable considering the number of media products available both in print and broadcast market in Pakistan. Thus, competition within each media (between television/

radio channels or newspapers) is greater compared to the competition between different media – i.e. between print and broadcast.

Though the Pakistani media market has experienced a reduction in number of print media products within the past decade, this has not largely affected the competition between major vernacular press companies. However, the trend in the broadcast media is totally the opposite. The boom (or the burst) in the broadcast media has paved the way for an intensive competition within the broadcasting stations or channels. This phenomenon has led to a tough ‘fight’ not only to be ‘the first to report’ but also to retain the captured audience for a longer period. Thus, sensitization, glorification and exaggeration are rampant especially in the Urdu and other vernacular media.

3. Lack of Educational and Professional Standards

Poor educational standards were sighted by many experts as one of the major reasons for the low standards in Urdu journalism. “Never mind the national or English language, the regional mother-tongue is not being taught in many of our rural schools,” says Adnan Rehmat,¹¹ the Country Head of Internews.

“Improving standards in the media should commence with education,” said Qasim Nawaz. “We are in a country where Urdu journalists are just confined to a world of Urdu without any exposure to the international world. In this context we cannot think of a better future for Urdu journalism. Education system must be changed,” he stressed. This situation leads to poor understanding of sensitive subject matters resulting in the absence of a proper media platform for healthy public discourse on crucial issues with national importance.

Another key element is the slow development of professional journalism training systems in the country which could not match to the rapid growth of the media industry. Until 2007 entire Pakistan had only 12 journalism schools or departments in universities. However, the media boom demanded expansion in media education system, and the number has been increased to 32 in the present context where journalism departments in universities such as the Peshawar University has been developed to the state-of-the-art standards with international support.

Emergence / boom of broadcast media also crippled the print media to a greater extent by attracting senior journalists for better salaries and perks. Expansion of broadcast media attracted many senior journalists from the print media, due to which the print media is suffering badly from, says Adnan. “More than 80% of present print news desks are with youngsters who have less than three-year experience and they are between the ages of 20 to 22 years. Their academic and exposure background is in a pathetic condition in understanding complex issues. Thus, their own perception or bias creeps into their own stories,” he says.

Poor working condition and safety issues have also affected the standards of journalism, mainly the Urdu press. Low salaries, absence of incentives and other benefits, no insurance schemes do not attract qualified youngsters to the profession. Perks and privileges for journalists vary from their working language to geographical areas. The gap between a Islamabad/Karachi based English language journalist and NWFP based vernacular language journalist is drastic. Peshawar based Urdu journalist Ghani-ur-Rehman¹² says his monthly income is less than USD 120 (Pak Rs10,000) even after 14 years of experience in journalism. “Sometimes, it takes months to get our salaries. I have three kids and life is extremely tough for us,” he said.

However, this situation is gradually getting better, according to some vernacular journalists. “Before 2007, my salary was less than Pak Rs 5000,” commented Ghani. The average monthly income of an Urdu journalist has been doubled during the past three to five years. This development has prompted a visible increase in the standards of Urdu media, according to Qasim Nawaz. “We have seen a development in the quality of Urdu media given the competition and the development of perks and privileges to journalists. Especially the present standard of Urdu media is better than what it was five years ago. But that does not mean we have rich standards – not at all,” Nawaz said.

It was noticed during the one-week Urdu press monitoring period that the print media news desks have become extensively dependent on the broadcast media. This could even be seen in the English press also but to a lesser extent. Many newspaper stories mention their source to ‘Monitoring Desk’ which is highly depending on mainly broadcast media reports. In fact this has become a syndrome where, it was noticed, that lethargic approach of news journalist to sensitive issues has come to an alarming level. The danger is the print media’s dependency on a highly competitive and glorified reporting in broadcast media without practicing its own journalistic norms and procedures.

In fact some media organizations have their own print and broadcast media and the stories are frequently exchanged between the two media. Perhaps, the absence of a converged news-desk provides the average reader with a view that the particular story in the newspaper has been ‘hijacked’ from a television channel.

4. Exploitation by the Corporate Ownership / Advertising Market

Less qualified journalists with low professional standards are an indirect blessing in disguise for the ownership for many media institutions in many parts of the world – kind of a global phenomenon. It provides the ownership with immense economic and ideological benefits in manipulating the content according to his/her political, economic, religious or other forms of agendas.

“Urdu journalists are under exploitation by the owners. In English journalism, you need to be qualified, at least up to the Masters level and also these qualified individuals would challenge the owner’s ideology and authority, at least to some extent. In contrast, the low standard in Urdu journalism is due to poor salaries and poor educational standards. This is something under the total discretion of the owner to get his message across through his own publication without professional confrontations and conflicts. Therefore, there exists huge gap between English and Urdu journalism.” Nawaz says.

The other most important element is the advertising among which most prominent for regional press is the State’s 25% stake. The regional newspapers have become an innocent victim of this state advertising monopoly which has some USD 20 million budget per annum making the government the largest source of advertiser for the print media in the country, according to Adnan. The untold factor of this phenomenon is that the government is using this mammoth advertising budget to dictate terms to the regional newspapers. “Government uses its advertising quota as a pressure point on regional newspapers so that no newspaper can stand against the government,” says Adnan.

5. Conservative Market

Many experts believe that Pakistan experienced a remarkable economic growth during the past decade – especially during the Musharaff regime – creating an extensive consumer market which has also positively affected the media including the vernacular press. Despite this expansion of the highly commercially valuable market, the ideological environment of the conservative Pakistani media consumer market has not changed – in contrast, it would have deteriorated into radicalism. Therefore, the Urdu media intends to win and retain its market through catering to this ideologically radicalised market.¹³

This ‘catering to the radicalised readership’ concept is more applicable to the regional vernacular media comparing to the national newspapers which cannot take side with one school of thought or ideology due to the vulnerable national level market. “We should be aware of our national market which consists of every district of Pakistan irrespective of their ethnicity or other allegiances,” says Javed Siddiq, the Resident Editor of pro-Islamic newspaper Nawa-i-Waqt. “As mainstream Urdu media we should not resort to ethnicity or any other divisions. Therefore, we cannot afford to antagonize our own regional markets. If we do not keep these sensitivities in mind, we lose our circulation,” he stressed.

Urdu media by comparison has been less liberal, more conservative and has tended more often to veer towards radicalization because such a policy sells, says Bilal Lakhani¹⁴ of the Express Media Group. According to its Executive Editor Muhammad Ziauddin¹⁵ that policy sells because the Urdu media consumers have a typical mindset--- a mindset born out of prevalent socio-political environment reinforced by what can be described as the 'officially certified truth' about the country's history, the reasons for its coming into being and a fictional interpretation of Islam's glorious past.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Being one of the most influential and reached-out media, the vernacular press needs urgent attention of the concerned parties to uplift its standards to professional status. One must be mindful of the fact that improving the standards of vernacular media means improving the social – political standards of its own population. Thus, this remains the most crucial element in media development as well as stabilization of democracy through creating an informed public.

The first initiative should be from the corporate ownership of the media houses commencing with recruitment. Presently those who are being attracted to the profession (mainly vernacular press) at the entry level are with poor educational qualifications and low standards mainly due to the low salary structures. This chicken-egg cycle must be changed with immediate effect. The employers should look at high educational standards in higher skills in its endeavours in improving the social standards in the profession.

The existing vernacular media community must be provided with continuous professional training in two fronts. Their skills in the second language (preferably English) must be drastically enhanced while exposing them to international best practices and standards. The ownership tends to invest heavy on the technology and machinery but not on the human resources. This phenomenon needs to be changed and more attention is required in investing on enhancing the professional and social standards of the existing human resources at the vernacular news desks that should necessarily include the senior level – especially the editors. This would pave the way for much needed change of attitude, aptitude and perception at large.

A change in the perception of the culture of vernacular press is direly needed. More perks, recognition and working standards are diverted to the English press in any media house (where both vernacular and English press exist) depriving the vernacular journalist. This culture of 'imbalanced treatment' or rather discrimination must end while introducing equal treatment to all journalists irrespective of their working language. I would not object if one needs to pay more attention to the vernacular press against the English press given the present context of working conditions. These professional incentives should include social security initiatives such as insurance schemes and other safety covers, especially for those who are working in vulnerable areas.

These measures would certainly attract skilled, educated youth to the profession which is totally opposite to the present dynamics in the media field.

The donor-funded media development projects should pay more thrust on the development of the vernacular press in the country. The donors should understand the fact that the desired outputs or outcomes in good governance or other democratic goals could not be achieved without improving the standards of the vernacular press in the country. Media is not limited to urban centric elites, but its total opposite.

If one accuses the media of being corrupt, and put the main blame on the vernacular press, it's the responsibility of those same accusers to find answers to the next immediate question – 'why is it corrupt?' The answers to this simple question rely on a less-complex social research.

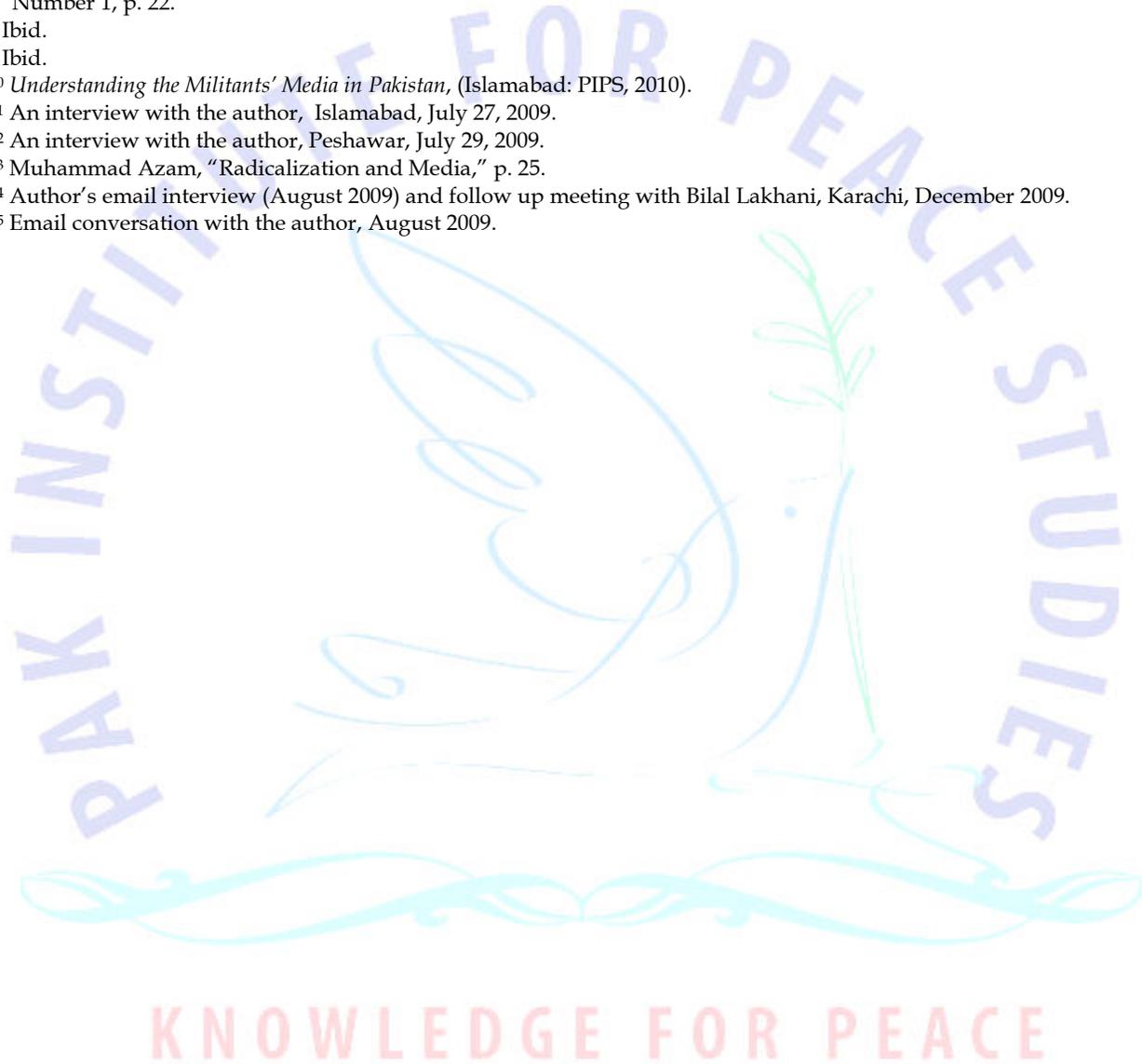
The most important factor in this entire process is the unity among different players in the media theatre. It is totally unfair to put the blame on corporate ownership if the journalist community is not prepared to the desired professional change. Thus, it is a collective effort of the owners, editors and journalists at large without excluding those of the government. The most cardinal responsibility of the state is to create the necessary socio-political environment for the professional enhancement of media.

The last component is the market. It is learnt that the vernacular press in Pakistan has long been a follower of the market, but not a leader or a guide. This situation needs a drastic change. The reader should be well informed and be educated, enabling him/her to question the media. This is a common vacuum in many parts in South Asia, not confined only to Pakistan. However, it is the responsibility of the same media in doing so – informing and educating the reader. Thus, we are still stuck in another chicken – egg cycle which could only be broken by the collective of owners, editors and journalists.

KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

Notes:

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- ¹ *Understanding the Militants' Media in Pakistan*, (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010).
 - ² Qasim Nawaz, an Urdu media journalist, an interview with the author, Islamabad, July 26, 2009.
 - ³ http://www.pemra.gov.pk/pdf/List_of_Licences_Operational.pdf
 - ⁴ http://www.pemra.gov.pk/pdf/LIST_OF_SATELLITE_TV_LICENCE_ISSUED.pdf
 - ⁵ *Between radicalization and democratization in an unfolding conflict: Media in Pakistan*, (Denmark: IMS, 2009).
 - ⁶ Javed Siddiq, Editor daily Nawa-i-Waqt (Urdu), an interview with the author, Islamabad, July 28, 2009.
 - ⁷ Muhammad Azam, "Radicalization and Media," *PIPS Research Journal Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 1 (2008), Number 1, p. 22.
 - ⁸ Ibid.
 - ⁹ Ibid.
 - ¹⁰ *Understanding the Militants' Media in Pakistan*, (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010).
 - ¹¹ An interview with the author, Islamabad, July 27, 2009.
 - ¹² An interview with the author, Peshawar, July 29, 2009.
 - ¹³ Muhammad Azam, "Radicalization and Media," p. 25.
 - ¹⁴ Author's email interview (August 2009) and follow up meeting with Bilal Lakhani, Karachi, December 2009.
 - ¹⁵ Email conversation with the author, August 2009.



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