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MEDIA AND A CULTURE OF PEACE

Country Report: Pakistan

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Department of Mass Communication
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Our good as well as bad fortune lies in a very special fact of our times. Luckily and unluckily we live in an age of media culture that facilitates life and creates so many problems at the same time. In modern society nothing is accepted to have happened if the media does not report it and then, its reporting or mis-reporting drive people to misperception and even to rioting and killing each other. Subliminal massages coming from the media, influence every aspect of human environment and play a major role in shaping up of personalities.

How should these all-powerful media function? Should there be any guidelines? Should there be any maneuvering and manipulation to achieve noble objectives, are questions of complex and time consuming debate. Yet philosophers of media science believe that with steering, accelerator and brakes the media can help us reach to a better tomorrow.

State of the Pakistani media is no different than it is in so many other countries. Media practitioners in Pakistan also prefer bad news over good news, and majority of them remains unconcerned after reporting an ugly incident. Yet there are indications and examples of positive and goal directed behavior which promises better understanding and better practices to promote a culture of peace. What seems to be required is mainstreaming and cultivation of different than past perceptions through the media.

_Pakistan Today_

Oscillating quite often between democratic and military rule, Pakistan is perhaps the only Asian country where political change does not mean more than a change of face. With four military regimes of Ayub, Yahya, Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharaf and five short lived elected governments of ZA Bhutto, Benazir and Nawaz Sharif, the country is still confronted
with difficult economic and political problems. Its per-capita income is still the highest in the sub-continent, but the quality of life has not improved as desired.

In view of so many international and domestic problems concerning governance, credibility and inter community balance, the country at present is in the process of proclaimed self-correction. The result would be known by the end of three year period granted to the present government by the supreme court.

The society in Pakistan is an amazing mix of diverse and conflicting forces. The core of the society is religious, encircled with a strong attitude of self-interest and then there seems to be a small layer of deep Pakistanism, which can at times, play a more important role than generally expected.

At present the religious element is under focus due to Taliban’s coming to power in neighboring Afghanistan. Some segments of the society, including the English press feel that Talibanisation of Pakistan is a real threat. Silent majority however does not share this terror, believing that Pakistan army, other para-military and auxiliary forces, the police and educated elite would not let it happen.

Economy is believed to be slowly improving owing to some enlargement of tax base due to an extensive survey of small and medium trade houses.
The present military government promises to cleanse the economy, the business, as well as the bureaucracy in the fixed period of three years ending 12th October 2002.

The third and most noticeable element of the society is Pakistanism which largely remains dormant and occasionally into action. An example being the general reaction after Indian nuclear explosion in the recent past. This sentiment is believed to be an asset and an indication which might help improve quality of life in the future.

One thing which ripped Pakistani society at several places, was the Russian intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. Hundreds and thousands of Afghan refugees brought to Pakistan an era of weaponization and drug addiction.

During the last 21 years Pakistan has gradually slipped to more difficult times highlighted due to gun-running, drug trafficking inefficient governance and change of governments every two three years.

Heartening is the fact that the society is not letting all bad things to happen without resistance. Alarmed with the situation several NGOs like internationally acclaimed ABDUL SATTAR EDHI FOUNDATION are trying hard to put a concerted fight against the brutality of deeply selfish elements. Another example is that of Alamgir Welfare Trust which, among other things campaigns against the burgeoning tendency to commit suicide. The trust tells the depressed people in its wall chalking "Do not commit suicide, share your torments with us." Whatever limited extent of their success may be, the effort is being made.

**Media Scene**

Technologically developed and commercially quite successful the media in Pakistan are still in a nascent stage in view of their contents. Reporting
the happenings and keeping the receivers informed are functions which are well performed. Some weakness however lies in the field of guidance and motivation the people for essentially required social change.

Electronic and print media in Pakistan have developed along two different lines. While television and radio are the government propaganda machines, the movies are made to provide sub-standard entertainment to the illiterate and semi-literate. Right from the beginning in 1947, Radio Pakistan has been kept in servitude to the Ministry of Information officials and the various Chief Executives. It did entertain the masses through music and immensely popular plays but kept them completely misinformed about the prevailing conditions of life in the state. This failed policy was extended to the glamour of showbiz with the advent of television in 1964. Pakistan television won some international awards for its entertainment programmes but it could not qualify as a neutral, honest and a credible news provider during 36 years of its existence. (Ban imposed in India on PTV programmes, during the Kargil crises in 1998 is perhaps the only feather in PTV's cap) With their one-sided news service, radio and television in Pakistan are switched on largely for entertainment. Those who look for dependable news, turn to newspapers and periodicals or tune their radio sets to listen BBC.

From 1947 onwards the press workers in Pakistan put up a very brave struggle for the freedom of expression which brought in 1988, the annulment of the 'Black Law' (Press Ordinance 1963). In its place was implemented the Press and Registration Ordinance 1988. The change, though not fully satisfactory, started the present period of several new publications including a few powerful and uncompromising dailies.

At present it seems to be an interesting division of labour between electronic and print media. While radio, television and the movies keep large number of illiterate and quasi-literate people relaxed and
entertained, the press provides the other kind of people with information and insight into the important matters of state.

A general comparison of the electronic and the press media in Pakistan might be of interest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ownership or control</th>
<th>Radio and television</th>
<th>Movies</th>
<th>Newspaper, Periodicals and Books</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Private companies</td>
<td>Private companies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agenda</td>
<td>I. Publicity of government, Functionaries and development schemes</td>
<td>I. Money making</td>
<td>I. Money making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. Entertainment for the Masses</td>
<td>II. Entertainment</td>
<td>II. Gaining political and social influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III. Making Money</td>
<td></td>
<td>III. Promoting change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the content</td>
<td>I. One-sided in news</td>
<td>I. Overburdened with melodrama</td>
<td>I. Embracing all walks of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. Elitist in plays and music</td>
<td>II. Largely irrelevant to the life of common Pakistani</td>
<td>II. Very relevant to common people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III. Namesake religious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receivers</td>
<td>Mostly middle class</td>
<td>Majority of low income communities</td>
<td>Mostly middle class and a small number of high income community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reporting of aggression in the Pakistani Media is naturally related to violence in society. All daily newspaper publish a detailed account of such acts and on almost all occasions, newspaper coverage is much more truthful and different than its brief version of official press release.
Official television and radio cover various acts of violence only when it is extremely serious and a threat to law and order. A comparison of the two dailies (one Urdu and one English) reveals that Dawn provides a greater coverage to aggression and violence in Pakistan. Among such items covered from foreign countries both the dailies provide nearly equal coverage.

Radio Pakistan did not cover reports on domestic violence in its prime time news bulletins on 10th, 11th and 12th November. According to daily newspapers, there were 28 cases of violence in these 3 days which were befittingly published. Radio did cover reports of violence in foreign countries and devoted 20 to 40% of time consumed in foreign news items. Pakistan television too did not telecast any reports on domestic aggression in its major English bulletin at 6:00 pm. Foreign violence however was covered everyday and 20 to 31% time of the foreign news was devoted for such stories. Radio Pakistan and Pakistan television seems to follow a quite similar policy in this regard. It means that domestic violence came to the knowledge of the people only through the newspapers.

Dawn has consumed much more space per item in comparison to Jang, which brings an important fact to our notice. In Pakistan, acts of aggression and violence are prevalent among the poor and semi-literate people who cannot read English. For their motivation against violence more appropriate coverage in Urdu and in other regional language might be more productive.

Coverage of aggressive acts in Urdu press in generally more sensational by way of headline size, placement and photographs. Usually big
prominent headlines are published in reverse and pictures of blood-soaked
dead bodies too, are not uncommon.

Educated sections of the society react and criticize this kind of coverage
but the majority accepts or condones it without comment.

Since Pakistan is in the grip of political and sectarian violence for the last
20 years, several sections in society have come forward to launch some
kind of a movement in favor of peace and harmony. The media
particularly the print media, are at the center of this movement. The prime
newspapers of the country publish and highlight the incidences of
violence with care and without fear. They also organize discussions
among celebrities and thus produce exclusive news of great value. Some
NGOs too have played a very important role in this regard. They have
positive thinking through their seminars and publications. Only a few days
back about a dozen organizations of artist, authors and intellectuals
demanded peace, harmony and tolerance in a three day ‘Pen for Peace’
conference. Concluded on 27th November, the conference invited the
attention of all warring parties including the governments, religious sects
and major communities to give peace a chance.

Such efforts are reported by the print media, and particularly by the
prominent English dailies. In Urdu newspapers the flag of tolerance and
peace is in the hands of column writers. Almost all columnist in largely
circulated dailies advocate the advantage of security, sectarian tolerance
and peace. Urdu newspapers also publish poetry, which does influence
some minds in Pakistani society.

Peace relevant issues which are reported and discussed by the print and
only occasionally by the electronic media are

I. Sectorian Peace
II. Inter-religious Peace

III. Gender Equality

IV. International Conciliation

V. Good Governance

Daily newspapers focus on peace relevant issues mainly by emphasizing self-improvement through religion and education. They also highlight gender equality. Radio and television broadcast daily programmes on religion and provide some coverage to the festivals of minorities.

Vernacular newspapers advocate religion more often than the English dailies. Almost all Urdu dailies bring out a profusely colored special edition on Friday and also on all other religious occasions like SHAB-E-BARAT (night of absolution) which fell on 11th November this year. The electronic media on the other hand use 9 to 11% of their broadcasting time for religion. Their programs included translation and interpretation of Holy Qurran, Tradition of Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) and Islamic quiz etc.

The section of Holy Qurran which are picked up for recitation and interpretation are related to neat and clean life, based on honesty, abstinence from sins, respect for other religions and the need of balance society.

Since about 55% of population is illiterate, newspaper coverage of the issues does not affect a notable change. The electronic media could have campaigned for peace in a far more effective manner, but their attention is focused only on occasional sermonizing. Efficient means of music and drama have not been used with continued devotion.
Threats to Peace

The issues which threaten peace and tranquility quite often, might be divided into three categories. First and foremost issues are religious and historical in nature. Most intricate among these is the Shia-Sunni question which dates back to thirteen centuries of different perceptions. Unfortunately and quite amazingly these differences are deepening with the spread of education. Some elements in the society believe that explosion of religious prejudice is a product of sermons at the places of worship.

In these sermons, religious leaders compete to gain attention and importance.

Away from Shia-Sunni problem the Blasphemy Law implemented by Zia-ul-Haq regime (1977-1988) started a period of tension between Muslims and Christians. The sprit of the law is to caution the careless against showing disrespect towards the Prophet of Islam. Not the law itself but the use of it has been a matter of debate, legal action, international pressure and occasional rioting and killing in some areas of Punjab province.

The third kind of issues are political. Being potent means of exploitations. These issues pit almost all regional ethnicities against Punjab which is the largest province and therefore dominates in administration. This tension has led some elements to occasional violence. Analysts accept its presence and its driving force, but refuse to believe it of any particular consequence.

Fortunately inter-ethnic clashes have never reached to a serious level of concern. For quite long and specifically during the three days (10th, 11th and 12th Nov) in focus, any clash of this mature did not happen. This,
however, does not mean that political and historical tensions like sectarian tensions have weakened. For the last 25 years now, Sunnis and Shias the two major sects of Islam, are at each other neck in the country so much so one or two sectarian murders are committed almost every month. Sometimes mosques etc are also attacked with automatic rifles or bombs. In this eventuality, the newspapers and the electronic media cover the news in detail, they try to pacify the people with their discussions etc. But everything is forgotten within a few days, which leaves the activist completely on the mercy of sect leaders.

Ethnic difference are very much alive and the related issues are debated only in the newspapers. But official television and radio do not even hint at such delicate matters which might raise eyebrows and could bring a dismissal or at least an explanation letter to the neglectful employee.

The media in general are quite conscious of such forces at work in society. Almost everyday television and radio broadcast programmes to argue national unity and to dispel explosive doubts created by vested interest. Special programmes on Pakistan movement, on services of top Muslim leaders and melodious national songs of PTV and PBC are quite popular among the masses.

Newspapers bring out special editions on the birth and death anniversaries of all leaders of Pakistan movement belonging to all parts of sub-continent including Punjab. Such matters are discussed by the media a little more openly today than in the past.
What the media can do?

1. Pakistan has a large population of people who just love their poverty and illiteracy. These easily excitable elements believe that change is neither possible nor necessary. Since these people are exploited by the politicians and money offering schemers, change in their perception is essential. Television and radio can be used to promote a culture of peace among such elements.

2. The media generally report an event, comment upon it if necessary and then wait for some other incident to happen. Actually for peace and strengthening the present culture of peace, continued campaigning is required. The campaign must go on in all circumstances.

3. Promotion of inter-religion, inter-sect and inter-ethnic understanding must be promoted through teleplays based on friendly relations among people of different beliefs.

4. A special kind of militancy is required for non-violence too. Such positive militancy can be encouraged among the youth through internet chatting, music and NGOs catering for young people alone. The media can provide a platform or a forum to such organizations.

5. Peace and harmony is an essential precondition for the success of any movement concerning development. The media are in a position to gradually stabilize this perception that required positive change cannot come without jealously guarding peace and without enhancing the present level of tolerance.

6. Violence, rioting and killing is closely related with poverty and illiteracy. Intolerant behavior and short sighted killings are rarely seen in the countries where rate of literacy and per capita income is high. Financial tension leads illiterate mind to blind acceptance of whatever
assignment is available for money. Raising the level of tolerance and harmony, therefore, depend on eradication of poverty and illiteracy. It is here that the governments and conscious elements of society must work together. And this policy must not change, with the change of governments.

**Exploratory Survey**

A small questionnaire survey was conducted between 15\textsuperscript{th} and 25\textsuperscript{th} November 2000 for the purpose of this tracer study. Here is its brief report.

1. The sample: Due to the very short time available the sample comprises of 30 respondents, 5 of them female and 6 belonging to the religious minorities. Out of these 6, two were Hindus, two Christians and two Parsis because Buddhists are hard to find in Pakistan. Instead Parsis are a prominent minority in Karachi from where almost all the respondents were selected. Out of the 30 respondents 19 belong to the media (press, radio and television) and the rest to NGOs, religious groups and advocates of peace.

2. The tool: For this tracer study a short questionnaire was supplied by AMIC. Written in English the four questions were misunderstood by some of the respondents, working in Urdu newspapers etc. An Urdu translation was therefore desirable but not possible. In view of the problems, it would be good if another survey is attempted in future. It may have a larger sample and an Urdu version of the questions.
The Findings

I. Majority (53%) disagreed with the statement that news was basically negative in nature. None agreed strongly while 30% simply agreed.

II. Majority (56%) did not accept that the media in Pakistan give prominence to conflicts, wars, inter-ethnic strife and misunderstandings. 33% respondents agreed. However 43% were of the opinion that the media do indulge in these wrongdoings.

III. With respect to biased reporting, opinion was found to be almost equally divided.

IV. Slightly more 16 vs 11 respondents believed that the NGOs have not performed well. Three respondents did not express their opinion.

V. Again, slightly more 15 vs 14 people disagreed that NGOs and religious groups have established good relations with the media.

VI. An overwhelming majority 86% agreed that for the promotion of a culture of peace, all concerned parties should work very closely. One disappointed respondent said, “It is not possible.”

VII. The eight respondents belonging to strict Islamic group and the minorities, Hindus, Parsis and Christians have provided a slightly different picture. Here the majority believed that

- News was basically negative
- Media in Pakistan do not give prominence to conflicts
- Reporting about religion was often biased
- Religious groups and NGOs have established good relations with the media
- All parties concerned must work together for a culture of peace

With respect to performance of NGOs, their opinion was equally divided.
VIII. Majority of the respondents could not find examples of good practices adopted by the media in reporting about religion. However, several of them mentioned Daily Dawn as the newspapers which has made positive contribution to the promotion of peace.

IX. Oft repeated suggestions for the promotion of peace, tolerance and harmony included:

i.) Arrangements for really good education

ii.) Periodic evaluation of media performance

iii.) Regular screening of television dramas based on inter community understandings; and

iv.) Good governance
# Exploratory Survey

Sample=8, comprising 6 respondents from 3 minorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial Number</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>News is basically negative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Media in Pakistan give prominence to strife</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reporting about religion is often biased in Pakistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Religious and societal groups and NGOs have performed well</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>NGOs etc. have established good relations with the mass media</td>
<td>50-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>All parties should work more closely to promote a culture of peace</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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## Exploratory Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial Number</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Majority Response</th>
<th>Extent of Majority</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>News is basically negative</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Media in Pakistan give prominence to strife</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reporting about religion is often biased in Pakistan</td>
<td>Almost 50-50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Religious and societal groups and NGOs have performed well</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>NGOs etc. have established good relations with the mass media</td>
<td>Almost 50-50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>All parties should work more closely to promote a culture of peace</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>87%</td>
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