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From Regression To Renewal

By

Javed Jabbar
From regression to renewal

From emancipation to enslavement, from mass media to minority media, from integration to isolation, and from enlightenment to ignorance. From rhetoric to reality, Javed Jabbar offers his keen perceptions of the many paradoxes that communication media tend to offer in relation to change.

Javed Jabbar

As one broadens the mass media perspective to include Asia, and the world, it should be noted that we may lose the truth of local detail and gain, or acquire, the generality of scale. At such a seminar this may not be a bad thing. For, after all, such a perspective makes our presentation safely stimulating and sensibly cerebral. All we have to inoculate ourselves against is the disease of intellectual innocuity.

And so in to the breach. I offer for your consideration some stray, spontaneous flashes and some belaboured thoughts, most of them simmering somewhere in the subterranean of the subconscious, with a couple of them floating weightlessly on the surface for an indeterminate period. At the sound of the word 'seminar', they have all arisen, ghosts from the past, mirages from the present, to condense and formulate themselves into a few identifiable elements. And because I have always been bad at arithmetic, and consequently have developed a perverse fascination for figures, I shall indulge myself in the luxury of numbering my follies. Here then are the four paradoxes of the mass media:

1. From emancipation to enslavement:

The birth of mass media, their first phase, scrambling their respective birthdays into a single stage for purposes of description, the first phase of mass media can be viewed as a phase of the commencement of emancipation for the people. Emancipation not from economic bondage or exploitation, but emancipation from dependence on interpersonal communication, or word-of-mouth, as the principal or only source of information, knowledge, opinion and entertainment.

This is not to say that emancipation occurred overnight and that it is already complete. Far from it. Emancipation from dependence on interpersonal communication alone continues today and will continue in the decades to come. In numerous Third World countries, the majority of the population still remains beyond the pale of the mass media simply because illiteracy or low economic status prevents them from personal access to the mass media.

The creation of mass media separated, for the first time, knowledge per se from the disseminating individual human being. Information-knowledge-opinion-entertainment — the four constituents of mass media content became objectivised, detached,
The volatility of the mass media was tamed by the sterility of political control.

existing in, and by themselves, distinct and separate from, the original human, mortal source. The glorious tradition of the verbal, vocal heritage remains. For example, thousands of musical ragas of South Asia passed from ear to ear through the centuries, as did folk tales, and basic human values passed from parents to children timelessly; the objective of knowledge by mass media has signalled the universal potential for emancipation, by which each human being is able to exercise in theory at least, the fundamental human right to communication, to knowledge, and ultimately, to communication.

After this brilliant, blinding glimpse of the potential for emancipation, there came the second stage wherein the idea had to be made operational, wherein mass media concepts became mass media corporations.

The disseminatory nature of mass media, their intrinsic ability to initiate ripples of movement by giving people the insights afforded by facts, stimulated an organic response by society in the form of corporate and political control.

In the case of capitalist and mixed systems, the populous aspect of mass media levelled individual taste to the common denominator of popularity with "economies of scale" becoming the excuse for a paucity of substance. More relevant here, the idealism of mass media was virtually consumed by the realism of commerce.

In the case of economies dominated by the state, the lack of scope for dissent in the political process reflected itself in the precept applied to mass media. This precept can be described as "the imperatives of consensus", under which the opportunities inherent in mass media for spontaneity and discovery must be sealed, in the larger interest of national harmony and discipline. Thus, the volatility of the mass media was tamed by the sterility of political control.

This second stage then is the period of enslavement for the mass media. In time and space terms, we are partly still in this second stage of change, and partly out of it. The reason why we may now be in a third stage, a stage of re-assertion by mass media of their inherent emancipatory quality is related to the actual state of the mass media family today as contrasted with the original mass media quartet of print, radio, TV and cinema which we set out with earlier.

2. From mass media to minority media:

The technology of the twentieth century has turned us topsy-turvy. After the initial arbitrarily-scrambled phase in which mass media were brought forth into this world, technology is going through intensive acceleration, a condition so acute it is almost anarchic.

With one hand, technology is extending and multiplying the applications and permutations of mass media, and with the other, technology's sheer speed is making the by-products and off-shoots of mass media almost obsolete overnight.

The print medium alone has spawned at least five sub-media — newspapers, periodical magazines, books, pamphlets, posters.

Radio, and its revolutionary impact on the perception of sound, has inspired magnetic audio tape but within a single generation, the sub-medium of the popular quarter-inch spool tape is being replaced by the cassette tape. Radio has also created the minority interest medium of FM broadcasting.

Television has fathered its own stable of sub-media such as video tape, cable TV, video discs, tele-conferencing, etc. Due to TV's close interfacing with the film medium, the content of TV and its sub-media, exchange and share material with the cinema.

Under the cinema umbrella, motion picture film has led to the spread as well as the rapid decline of the proletarian camera, the 8 mm and the Super 8 mm, fast becoming extinct because of the relative advantages of video cameras and tape as opposed to film cameras and film. At the same time, in many parts of the world, such as India, the USSR, and even, ironically in the USA, where TV set ownership is growing, or is already common, there the cinema as a theatrical medium survives and thrives. Even in the seemingly monolithic cinema structure of a large cinema society such as India, there are already three distinct types of feature films being made and screened — the patently commercial block-buster, the purely aesthetic and artistic, and a third category, a fine compromise between the two, each of these three with a distinct, independent audience.

Through sub-media, and through different types of content of the mass media, we therefore witness the concurrent development of minority media which, while being derivative of the original mass
media quartet, have shown the capability of quite specific, individual characteristics. For example, the pirated video tape version of a feature length film otherwise not available for viewing in a given country, and seen with relative ease on a domestic TV set, is bound to initiate and encourage not only a unique usage of a mass medium but also alter, in a substantive way, the attitude and perception of the mass medium’s audience towards the utility and relevance of the mass medium itself. Similarly, cable TV and FM and magazines cater to special interests, often “minorities” amongst the masses.

Are we then moving towards a whole conglomeration of minority media, and minority or special interest groups in place of the faceless, nameless “masses” and the equally bland description of “mass” media?

3. From integration to isolation:

Simultaneous to the emancipatory nature of mass media wherein a universal human franchise for information was implicit in the very creation of the mass media, there is also, I believe, a sociological phenomenon to be noted, a process relevant to the structure of society by which different classes and segments of society were encouraged to come into greater contact with each other, a process of both physical and cultural interaction.

We could describe this as the sociability of mass media, a tendency to promote the gregarious impulse in people. Classes and segments read about each other, saw each other on screen, heard about each other on the radio. Crucially, as evident today, a mass circulation Urdu language newspaper in Pakistan will be read under the shade of the village banyan tree and read with equal interest in air-conditioned offices on I.I. Chundrigar Road, principally for a common, shared interest in the political and news content, reflective of the unifying aspect of mass media.

For instance, the cinema in a theatre also brings people together. Though different ticket classes may keep different social classes apart, recent changes in the economic sector have resulted in making it possible for low-income families to sit in the highest-cost ticket area, a difficult experience for the elitist in us to swallow and accept, especially when one might find a janitor in the next seat. Equally, however, this is a delightful and democratic dimension of the mass media and of the cinema, making the entire audience in the theatre a single proletariat.

Media reportage also helped create heroes and heroines who, though they possess intrinsic mass appeal, are undeniably magnified and made more alluring by being so visible or audible, that these media-reported personalities act as catalysts of interaction between classes and segments in society. Whether it is the characters of the silver screen or the champions of sport, the mass media have, in the initial stage and in part, continued to bring people together.

So one could venture to call this an act of helping integration, lowering social barriers, increasing mutual perception and understanding.

Yet, when one looks at the effect of certain sub-media on the behaviour of people it will be seen that there is emerging a definite pattern of social segmentation almost in exact step with the segmentation and minoritisation of mass media.

With the easy availability of domestic video entertainment such as through the VCR machine, people are turning away from the social experience offered by one medium such as the cinema, to obtain the private experience offered by video.

In this sense there is also a degree of cannibalisation in mass media, with TV borrowing heavily from the cinema, with print media using colour magazines to rival the appeal of the moving colour picture, with radio’s and tape’s versatility of location threatening the preserve of other sectors — the versatility of the mobile transistor set, the radio-cassette deck in a motor vehicle and the Walkman unit. Each of these manifestations of radio and audio tape have segmented mass audiences down to single individual audiences.

Video, in all its forms, complemented by the emergence of household computers, indicates the possibility in the future of the average time spent indoors by individuals and families actually increasing rather than decreasing. A curious permutation — industrial society and urbanisation are supposed to have fragmented the family and yet, one of the principal sectors of the industrial society, the mass media, and the minority media, could well help bring families a little closer together again.

Families may become closer internally, but as
groups relating to each other, segmentation is likelier.

Similarly, due to the profusion of print media we also obtain a diffusion of the audience. Granted, each unit of the newspaper category in the print medium may have an authentic, independent view to express. Yet, something jars about the fact that in countries with very low levels of literacy there is an excess of daily publications. And one does not know quite what to make of one’s feeling of regret that geography alone can sometimes prevent the ideally full dissemination of an appreciable part of newspaper content. For instance, except for the miniscule percentage of readers of English newspapers in Pakistan who read two English papers from two different cities every day, the overwhelming majority in Karachi read only Dawn and have truly no inkling whatsoever of what some very astute columnists or correspondents of the Pakistan Times and The Muslim have to say on various subjects under, and over, the sun. And vice versa. And this in a country where, in any case, barely one percent of the population subscribes to English newspapers — even that one percent is continuously “missing out” on what homogenous print media are saying just a few hundred miles away.

True, not an extreme or acute example of isolation but certainly a steady, nagging gap in the sharing process which mass media are meant to enrich. The solutions are obviously impractical: Dawn should have, irrespective of viability, an edition for Islamabad and an edition for Lahore. And similarly, for The Muslim and Pakistan Times in Karachi. Short of this wishful thinking, these three major newspapers should recognise that they do not compete with each other, at least in Lahore and Karachi, the two most popular areas, and that therefore there should be substantial sharing of columns dealing with opinion and interpretation. But then, the bedrock of reality — the reality of the respective bondages of newspapers, to corporations or to governments, or even more significant, the respective commitments to specific, and differing, editorial policies.

To come back to square one in this, the third message, there is apparent in mass media the tendency to take people from enlightenment to isolation.

4. From enlightenment to ignorance:

The unawareness on the part of the average Pakistan Times reader in Lahore of what the Dawn columnist has to say about a topical crisis is regrettable but not profoundly disquieting.

What really troubles one is that where mass media, the emancipators, the automatic information-dispensers of the twentieth-century, were supposed to assist and achieve universal enlightenment, they may have actually managed to create stupefication in place of education.

For one thing, it is said that people as a rule prefer to know, and to respond to, material about themselves, about their own society, and let the rest of the world go jump off a cliff. Now, North Americans are a much-maligned people largely because they are so prosperous and thereby provoke envy. But it is generally conceded that they are also a startlingly ill-informed people, in spite of having one of the most extensive mass media sectors in the world.

To stretch a comparison to the maximum limit of credulity one could state: take a scale. Put on one end of the scale an average American along with his regular daily newspaper, his favourite magazines, his TV set, his car radio, his occasional feature film-viewing time, etc. And on the other end of the scale, put the average illiterate Asian, who is undernourished to boot, alone, with no TV set, no newspaper, no magazine, possibly one knob or button of a transistor radio because that is all the share of mass media which will come to him when one relates number of radio sets to population. And weigh them on the scale of “knowledge of each other’s continents”. And I’m willing to eat my hat — simply because I never wear one and I don’t think I’ll ever have to — if the American’s “weight of knowledge” as compared to the Asian is barely more than a fraction. So what is all this emancipation and enlightenment about?

Sometimes I truly wonder where all that great frothing mass of facts, reportage, information, opinion, etc. which constitutes so great a part of the output of mass media, where does it all go? In one ear and out of the other? In one eye and out with the next blink, leaving only a thin, residual filmy haze behind.

Let our favourite whipping-boys, the American people, take a break. What of the world at large, or our own people? Why does my father’s generation, and now, alarmingly, my own generation, shake its
head in regret at the declining standard of knowledge and education? Is this only nostalgia or is it a correct perception? There are many causes for the decline in the quality of education but to have it happen when mass media are growing by giant strides makes it a curious occurrence. The young generation, today's children and juveniles, are certainly sharp, certainly very aware of live games and video games but, in the same breath, they somehow seem to be less knowledgeable, less informed ...., though I truly hope I am wrong.

Children, or adults, in Asia or in other parts of the world, the mass media have had a similar impact everywhere — they have opened the eyes of the world, yes, and yet, why is it that this open-eyed look reminds me of the wide-eyed goldfish in a bowl, staring, unblinking eyes, seeing everything but comprehending very little.

The four perceptions presented here may appear to be regressive at first sight showing an irreversible degeneration. To my mind, they are also opportunities for reaffirmation, for renewal.

Mass media — temptations to profit, or purveyors of propaganda? In a Third World and Asian context, perhaps we have now had an excess of change, a surplus of technology, a weakening of the authentic spirit, a diversion from tradition.

Perhaps we need to rediscover and redefine the original essence of the mass media so as to strengthen their role as the dynamic means of information and opinion and entertainment, instead of becoming the arbitrary commandants of communication.

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