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Over the people's voice: Liberalisation of broadcasting media in Pakistan

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Three Muslim countries that share a strong authoritarian streak in their post-independence history show contrasting attitudes to the medium of radio. Two of them have demonstrated a refreshing liberalism towards popular ownership of the medium whereas one displays an excessively cautious approach. In Indonesia, there are over 700 private radio stations in Indonesia. In Turkey, at last count, there were over 600 private radio stations. In Pakistan, the total number of radio stations is only 25 of which 22 are part of state-owned and government controlled Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (Radio Pakistan). The other three are ostensibly separate private FM stations in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad but they are actually owned and controlled by the same single party which was the beneficiary of a secret, non-transparent award during the second government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The relatively large number of stations in the three Muslim countries means that even a political system dominated by the military recognises the social value of radio as a medium of communication and respects the right of citizens to have access to this means of communication. With its more Europe-oriented ethos, the abundance of radio stations in Turkey is comparatively less surprising. Nevertheless in a country where the military plays a decisive role in determining the basic direction of politics, the significance of allowing widespread access to radio is recognised.

The international consensus on promoting private radio stations on an extensive basis is well reflected in the fact that in the USA there is one radio station for about every 25,400 people whereas in Pakistan, there is only one radio station for every five million people! From the perspective of “need” the radio should have been the other way around because it is low-literacy in
developing countries like Pakistan that need radio more than developed countries. Yet the number of radio stations in the USA keeps increasing, not decreasing. It was 9444 stations in 1990. Today it is 10,237.

Radio has also served as a powerful instrument for development worldwide. For example, in West Africa and in Central America, radio has actually promoted literacy despite being a non visual medium and has been a force in the spread of basic education. In Indonesia, the medium has helped establish the imperative of a small family norm and has contributed towards bringing down the population growth rate.

Ownership of radio sets in sub-Saharan Africa is about 150 per 1000 people whereas in South Asia (and Pakistan) it is still only 88 per 1000 people, the lowest regional aggregate in the world. Even in the “Least Developed Countries” (LDC’s) at a level below Pakistan, the number of radio sets per 1000 people is higher at 96 while the Arab States are at 259.

Notwithstanding the political propaganda dimension that flows from its state ownership, the national radio system in Pakistan has made a pioneering and substantial contribution in projecting a national identity of Pakistan, in promoting music, drama, sports and general knowledge, in increasing awareness about health, education and development. Radio is the only medium in Pakistan that uses 20 languages and dialects daily. Yet on balance, we have failed to exploit the enormous potential of this medium.

The current condition of PBC graphically portrays this failure. The Corporation requires an annual subsidy in 1997-98 of Rs 578 million (about US$12.5m) to remain merely functional, with only 15 percent of its revenues coming from license fees and advertising. In a country where it is estimated that there are about 10 to 12 million radio sets, less than 500,000 - or less than 5 per cent - pay license fees of only Rs 30 per annum which is less than US$1. Advertising contributes only about Rs 85 million (US$1.9m) net to revenue.

Radio Pakistan is grossly overstaffed in some major departments and critically under-resourced in transmitting capacity, studio and field recording equipment and fees for freelance talent. The low powered transmitters in certain key areas such as border districts mean that one can hear All-India Radio loud and clear in Pakistani territory whereas Radio Pakistan’s signal in our own land is of poor quality.

Through a simple telephone call or through recording on location, radio offers a unique inter-activity. This facet of easy, convenient two-way communication is presently most evident on the private FM radio stations but, in reflection of the inherent flaws
of creating a monopoly and that too, on a non-transparent basis, telephonic inter-activity on local FM radio is stunted at the level of inanity and frivolity. Issues of serious concern to the citizens and to the nation are entirely omitted.

While radio was the first mass medium, and remains to this date, the only mass medium that truly democratises human knowledge, radio is also the medium that directly enfranchises all citizens. When people have easy and convenient access to radio they achieve a degree of empowerment through the opportunity to listen and learn and to articulate their concerns in a manner so direct and personal - their own voice - that it cannot be matched by the silence of print or the pictorial distraction of TV. Such an empowerment may not always be comprehensive empowerment. For instance political pluralism and civil liberties may be relatively restricted as they are in the case of Indonesia. But there is social and cultural empowerment which is a relevant preparatory element in the struggle to achieve greater political power for the people.

Despite the proliferation of TV in Pakistan over the past three decades, and its recent ascendancy over our attention through satellite channels, radio retains its core appeal. It can always beat TV by virtue of its low cost and immense convenience and by its wide listenership as a “mobile medium” that can reach inside a car and stretch across the planet.

When radio excels as an independent medium as it does in the case of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio Service we appreciate the exclusive advantage that a one-dimensional medium enjoys over a two-dimensional medium like television. Whereas radio can take us to the ends of the earth and into the limitless realms of the imagination without the confining pictorialism of a TV screen, radio can also go to greater depth into areas which television, not always, but often, deals with in only a limited manner.

We need to re-structure, de-regulate and autonomise Radio Pakistan. At the same time with appropriate safeguards as in other countries against misuse of radio to promote hatred or violence, we should have dozens, if not hundreds of private radio stations throughout the country with a minimum time allotted to public service broadcasting. For example in Karachi each major district could afford to have at least two or three radio stations so that the rich diversity of the city in all respects is articulated and in order that vocal participation by citizens in debate and discussion on the city’s issues can be freely aired as a necessary step towards the formulation of change.

Similarly, in the rest of the country, in each taluka (an administrative unit covering from 100 to 200 villages/towns) there
should be at least one private radio station that is able to represent the reality of the immediate environment. Community-Based Organisations (CBO's) and Non-Governmental Developmental Organisations (NGO's) could then be able to use radio to significantly increase participation by citizens in the development process. While such profusion may be a babble, from the noise will emerge authentic sounds and a true dialogue.

The caretaker government of Malik Meraj Khalid promulgated the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance (EMRA) 1997 on 14th February. The EMRA law visualises the creation of an autonomous Authority headed by a retired Justice of the Supreme Court and comprising six eminent individuals whose task it would be to entertain applications from private citizens and organisations for the establishment of radio stations and TV channels and to award these in a fair and transparent manner and to regulate them.

The people of Pakistan now await action by the Government of the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to introduce the Ordinance into Parliament for passage as an Act in order that the electronic media such as radio are able to play the lively and dynamic role that is required for the building of a new Pakistan.

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