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Business Monopoly, Cross-Ownership and Quest for Media Management in Pakistan



Syed Inam ur Rahman *

Muhammad Asghar †

Nauman Sial ‡

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Abstract: *The current study critically analyzed the existing state of consolidated media in Pakistan, its business models and its role in society. Consistent with the scholarly work, the study discussed that the five most influential media companies in Pakistan are less democratic, more professionalized and institutionalized which obstruct the free flow of ideas in the marketplace by ignoring alternative perspectives. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was mandated to ensure an equitable, pluralistic and diversified media system but it failed to deliver in the face of the corporate media sector. The present research also called for a more localized and less institutionalized media system in Pakistan to accommodate the concerns of all ethnicities and communities which will help in bringing more social cohesion and integration as compared to the existing media system which is alienating periphery and promoting bland consumerism.*

Key Words: Business Monopoly, Cross-Ownership, Media Management, PEMRA

JEL Classification:

Introduction

In the last two decades, the media industry in Pakistan has burgeoned with hundreds of television channels, social media outlets and newspapers. While the optimists see this as a positive development for the democratization and openness of the country, the pessimists argue the multiplication has not resulted in the desired outcome to achieve a diversified and pluralistic media content due to the concentration and monopolization of the electronic media industry. International Media

Support, [2012](#). Though the electronic media in Pakistan existed in the form of government-controlled Pakistan Television (PTV) since 1964 but unlike the print media, the private ownership of electronic media was allowed only in 2002 due to the changing regional and global realities(Siraj & Hussain, [2017](#)). During the Kargil War between India and Pakistan, the military strategists in Pakistan realized that the powerful private media of India forcefully advocated the Indian position and won them by supporting them internationally. So they

* Assistant Professor/Incharge, Department of Media and Communication Studies (DMCS), International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† PhD Scholar, Faculty of Management Sciences, Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

‡ Research Associate, Department of Media and Communication Studies (DMCS), International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.



started privatizing the electronic media in Pakistan so that in case of any tension, the Pakistani perspective would be sent aboard more efficiently. The decision to private ownership of the television industry was warmly accepted by the traditional media houses, big businesses as well international firms who invested million dollars in it. These investments led to a highly controlled and monopolized media industry by national and international firms through diagonal integration (Rasul & Proffitt, 2013).

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was set up to look at the affairs of the private television industry in Pakistan, which according to critics has not been up to its task (Hussain & Lynch, 2018). Pakistan is a diverse country in terms of ethnicities, faiths, cultures and many other aspects that often lead to tensions and conflicts among different communities (Hussain, 2017). In order to integrate the disparate segments of society, the PEMRA was mandated to work for a diverse media sphere in Pakistan—diversity in respect of content, sources, and ownership. However, this objective could not be achieved (Rasul & Proffitt, 2013), rather the issue has become even more challenging (Iqbal, 2015). So the current study would discuss the important aspects of the Pakistani electronic media industry and would evaluate the measures taken so far to encourage a more democratic and pluralistic media sector. To get a better perspective that how the media monopoly is affecting the democratic role performance of Pakistani electronic media, it is essential to briefly shed light on the scholarly work on the interactions among media ownership, media diversity and the public service role of mass media.

Media and Democracy

Mass media is considered a vital part of democracy. Media in the political process supplies news and information regarding the political process and actors to the general public. They highlight and identify the problem in society and serve as a medium of deliberation. Mass media also serves as a

watchdog which uncovers the misconduct of people in power. Therefore, media cannot operate in isolation but have to act according to the norms and values of the specific society in which it operates (Kellner, 2004; McQuail, 1992). Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) listed down a few functions of media towards society such as, “surveillance of sociopolitical developments, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials to account for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence” (p. 270). There is a growing concern that mass media is not properly fulfilling these functions. Critics argue that mass media operate as mass markets and are controlled by a few conglomerates that work for and support the status quo (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kellner, 2004; McChesney, 1999).

In the contemporary world, the news is not information but a source of entertainment; it is supplying gossip, scandals and violence to the general public. Political news mostly revolves around political personalities, their party's ideology and affiliations (Fallows, 1996). Serious debates on politics are most of the time missing in the media and the public is provided with meaningless political news (Bagdikian, 2004; Barnett, 2002). It is also argued that the media is always on the hunt for political scandals. These scandals are of politician's life and their families are part of the main news. They are ignoring the consequences of this scandalized political news over society. Sabato (1991) stated, “The news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy” (p. 1). While much more serious threats in our culture mainly go not reported, minor concerns are hysterically exaggerated (Glassner, 1999). Exaggerated fears frequently result in pointless regulations, policies, and gonzo justice (J. W. Spencer & Altheide, 2003), (2003). Additionally, critics criticize the media's inability to serve as a watchdog. For instance, under pressure from advertising, numerous media outlets concealed

information regarding the risks associated with smoking. Today Newspaper, [2014](#)

.The same is the case with political news coverage. Almost every media organization has their own political agenda, so they report political facts accordingly.

Challenges of Media Monopoly for Democratic Role Performance

News media presentation is grounded in the notion that media have different functions to perform depending upon the requirement of society. Many scholars suggest that news media should provide information, analysis and context for scrutiny of power holders (McQuail, [1992](#)). Many studies had been conducted on news media performance while covering political news, especially in times of crisis. According to Cappella and Jamieson ([1997](#)), the quality of political news is decreasing day by day, and as a result, it has a negative impact on political life. Media is providing little amount of serious or hard news. Poor media content, lack of factual and good journalism, misinterpretation of public opinion polls and other bad practices are losing public interest towards politics (Albaek, Van Dalen, Jebriil, & De Vreese, [2014](#)). To better serve democracy, political communication scholars long argued for localized, de-institutionalized and public service-driven media systems (Bennett & Segerberg, [2012](#); Hallin & Mancini, [2004](#); Lynch & McGoldrick, [2005](#)). These scholars have criticized the existing elite-driven government-controlled media and the highly centralized and monopolized private media whose main interest is to maximize profits instead of serving the audiences (Herman & Chomsky, [2010](#)).

According to McQuail ([2005](#)), the media is considered the fourth pillar of the state. The media industry is different from other businesses in terms of its role in society and the functions it delivers. Media should be socially responsible, and must create awareness and education among the people about the important socio-cultural and political problems, and must work for equality and social justice instead of 'duping the

masses through propaganda and commercialism' (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). But to achieve such a media system, the ownership patterns and economic and business models of the existing media industry need to be examined and rectified. This is important in the Pakistani context where the government-controlled PTV has lost its credibility (Khan & Joseph, 2008), and the private electronic media is shying away from its democratic role due to the predominance of commercial interests (Iqbal, 2015; Rawan & Hussain, 2017; Siraj & Hussain, 2017). Many scholars working on the political economy of communication have warned against the dangers of a concentration of media ownership for society (Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 2010; Youngblood, 2016), which was facilitated by the changes in the global strategic politics as well as developments in the communication technologies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Thussu (2007) stated that the international media trade is predominantly owned by six media companies including News Corporation, Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Disney, Viacom, and Sony. All these companies are based in the United States (US) and export Americanized content to worldwide audiences. These media companies are conglomerates in the real sense that through acquisitions and mergers, they own hardcore media technologies, soft content including news, infotainment and production houses in Hollywood, satellite industries, social media networks, and other businesses like ownership of huge arms and weaponry firms, real estate and theme parks etc. (Bagdikian, 2004; Thussu, 2006). These six media conglomerates are very influential politically and economically through their monopolies over the news and entertainment sector globally. In the case of Pakistan, five big corporates including Independent Media Corporation, Pakistan Herald Publications, Waqt Media Group, ARY Group, and Lakson Group have monopolized the media industry that owns all the major newspapers, radio stations, social media networks, newspapers and magazines. These five media companies have consolidated their economic positions

through vertical and horizontal integration, thus monopolizing the media market and banishing small businesses from the market through standardization, professionalization and institutionalization (Rasul & Proffitt, 2013).

Political communication scholars have found an inverse correlation between cross-media ownership and the democratic role performance of news media. The more consolidated the media system is, the lesser chances for democratic performance. Highly concentrated and consolidated media promote the status quo by working closely with the societal elites to promote the existing system by de-legitimizing the alternative narratives that call for a more fair distribution of economic, political and societal resources (Herman & Chomsky, 2010; Lynch, 2013). The elitist narratives that the traditional media spin disempower the poor and promote a culture of consumerism, which is sponsored by transnational business firms (McChesney, 2008). Democracy can be better served when more diverse perspectives are shared and grievances of disadvantaged groups resolve in a free marketplace of ideas. According to McChesney (2008), large-scale media concentrations result in huge profits that often lead to high market competition, which makes it difficult for small and more democratic media outlets to sustain their finances.

Consolidated ownership and media conglomerations can be easily pressurized by political governments to acquiesce to their demands due to the reliance on governmental policies. Similarly, advertisers usually control these companies and disallow them to report on the large-scale economic problems emanating from the capitalist system like white-collar crimes, and economic inequalities (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Most alarmingly, media concentrations usually result in the homogeneity of content, which goes against the considerations of democracy. Researchers who have investigated the political economy of media conglomerates have found lesser diversity in terms of content and sources (Rasul & Proffitt, 2013). As nicely put by McChesney (1999) that rich media lead to poor democracy because alternative perspectives

do not get the limelight. For a functioning democracy, it is essential that the voices of periphery and marginalized groups must be heard and their concerns should be addressed. If media might be used to promote democracy, then it is imperative that the ownership patterns could be rectified and provisions might be made for the functioning of more localized, less professionalized and less bureaucratized media systems that promote alternative perspectives (Tehrani, 2002).

Scholars of political communication agree that media diversity is the first casualty of media concentration (Bagdikian, 2004; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The greater the concentration, the lesser the diversity. Media conglomerates follow highly standardized formats that discourage new ideas and innovations, and thus the new actors and topics seldom get chances to be approved (Thussu, 2007). A good media system should fairly represent all the segments of society and promote social cohesion. The profit-driven commercial media on the other hand, mainly focus on the urban elites due to their purchasing powers and presence at the national level. As time goes by, this circle of elites became the focal point and other perspectives were conveniently ignored and a new norm was generated and formalized (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). In Pakistan, media content mainly represents the elites of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, and the rest of the cities and peripheries usually stereotype and misrepresent (Hussain & Lynch, 2018).

Bennett (1990) has termed it as elite indexing because media usually promote elite perspectives due to their authoritative position, public credibility and the typical news value criteria. But the societal and democratic cost of this misrepresentation could be colossal. For example, in Pakistan despite the killings of thousands of people in the conflicts with the Taliban, Balochistan separatists, and the ethno-political conflict in Karachi, the majority of Pakistanis are unaware of the root causes of these conflicts and hence the security elites are able to capitalize on the

massive ignorance by promoting their securitized agendas (Hussain & Lynch, 2018; Iqbal & Hussain, 2017, 2018; Rawan & Hussain, 2017). Hussain and Lynch (2018) argued that in the ensuing violent conflicts in Pakistan, many opportunities for peacemaking arose but were suppressed by the people of mainland Pakistan due to their ignorance of the ground realities mainly due to the propagandistic and lopsided media coverage of these conflicts.

On the other hand, the consolidated media have often found it easy to thwart governments' initiatives to enforce regulations if these ran counter to their interests. In Pakistan, the media industry started a malicious campaign against the PEMRA whenever any particular television channel was penalized for some violations. In the past, many good attempts by PEMRA were scuttled by powerful media associations to discourage cross-media ownership (Rasul, 2004). But this is not the case for all institutions. Rules and regulations relating to media and communication are associated with the larger political and economic system in a country and powerful groups are always able to change these rules and regulations. The powerful military in Pakistan usually confiscates media freedom on national security issues without real resistance from the media. Alongside media, other institutions like the judiciary; police etc. usually acquiesce to the pressure from security forces due to their historic stronghold on the affairs of the country.

Regulating Media in Public Interests

To convince the general public about any message with the help of entertaining content may work best but finding sponsors for serious political debates is difficult (Herman & McChesney, 1997). Additionally, it is exceptional for mainstream media to present polarizing topics objectively. People want to hear arguments that support their own beliefs. As a result, it is challenging for the media economy to provide opposing viewpoints and consider both perspectives of a debate. In a controversy, the media is likely to take a side,

and if further evidence supports the opposing side, they are likely to remain silent rather than risk losing their reputation. Disclaimers don't bring in money. This process amplifies itself. The more the media generate consensus about an issue through influenced coverage, the fewer proponents of the conflicting view will there be to balance the issue, and the more difficulties will these proponents have in gaining access to the media (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989).

The print media cannot compete with the ability of the electronic media to keep their audience spellbound by strong sense impressions. The newspaper has strength for its in-depth analysis of social and political issues and events. The reasons behind the decrease in the strength of newspapers are the journalistic resources limited by economic competition and the limited niche of the reader market. The competition of newspapers and magazines is now limited to news, which is mostly about celebrities and other topics and has emotional appeal. Particularly in such newspapers, which are mostly sold from newsstands, everything that is risky, abnormal, or incorrect has a prominent place. To entice readers to purchase the paper, they want to feature a brand-new scandal on the front page each day. The same is the case with television and radio news (Blumler & Spicer, 1990). Since media are important institutions that create awareness among citizens about democracy and make it a useful governing system, there is a need to constantly oversee the media system, particularly the ownership patterns. As discussed earlier, consolidated media ownership prioritizes profit-making over public interests and hence puts the whole democratic process in jeopardy (McChesney, 2008).

It is, therefore, essential that media industries must be held accountable for their performance and a constructive balance should be maintained between their economic feasibility and service to the people. This is a common practice worldwide, and all the developed countries have put restrictions on their media to ensure that national interests are

being promoted(Thussu, 2006). In Pakistan, this task is being performed by the PEMRA, which has given a long list of objectives in this regard. One of the most important objectives set out by PEMRA is to work for national integration by bridging the gap between the different localities and cultures in Pakistan through more diverse content and a pluralistic approach. However, this is not happening as the country's media system is monopolized by five big corporates including Independent Media Corporation, Pakistan Herald Publications, ARY Group, Waqt Media Group, and Century Publications(Lakson Group)through an oligopoly of cross-media ownership by having all the major newspapers, television channels and popular magazines (Rasul & McDowell, 2012).

A number of Pakistani researchers have found that the private media industry has failed to diversify its content, characters and workforce which has serious repercussions for the policy and democracy(Hussain, 2017; Iqbal, 2015; Rasul & McDowell, 2012; Rawan & Hussain, 2017; Siraj & Hussain, 2017). The media is headquartered in the few urban centres where certain ethnic communities provide the workforce. The media coverage mainly focuses on urban-centred national politics and ignores events happening in the larger rural areas of the country. While evening talk shows on current affairs are the most popular genre(Rawan & Hussain, 2017), these shows mainly focus on the same political issues with the same list of discussants. This has resulted in serious non-representation and misrepresentation of peripheral areas like Balochistan, FATA and even southern Punjab(Iqbal & Hussain, 2017). The monotony in content and sources has implications for the health of Pakistani democracy. Despite the presence of over one hundred television channels, FM radio stations, and hundreds of newspapers, the majority of Pakistanis do not know the names of more than two cities in Balochistan—the largest province of the country(Hussain & Rehman, 2015). The ill-informed public opinion result in poor democracy and this is what happening in Pakistan(Hussain, 2015a). Moreover, in these talk shows which are conducted in the

infotainment format, politicians are usually blamed for all sorts of problems which create pessimism among the people that democracy is not fit for Pakistan and military rule should be supported(Hussain, 2015b).

Though PEMRA has the institutional responsibility to promote a more democratic media culture by ensuring a more diverse and localized information market, it has failed in this regard. In fact, since its establishment in 2002, the number of cross-media owners has increased and consolidated (Rasul & McDowell, 2012). As revealed by Rasul and Proffitt (2013), the data released by PEMRA shows that the majority of licenses have been acquired by traditional media conglomerates and even the small-scale licenses have been granted to the companies in the big cities which were originally meant for the small cities and regions. The existing media corporates mainly cater to the needs of urban elites in Pakistan and largely ignore the rural areas where the majority of people live, and who need more local and regional perspectives on national issues.

Conclusion

The current study presented a critical perspective on the cross-media ownership of the Pakistani media system and its implications for democracy in the country. Though PEMRA was mandated to ensure a more equitable and pluralistic electronic media system in Pakistan, the objective could not be achieved. The media is highly concentrated and monopolized by a few big media companies that also own the most influential print and social media networks. This consolidation has resulted in a strong urban-centred base for electronic media that cater only to the affluent populace. Local and regional perspectives are almost non-existent in the Pakistani scenario. While some local channels exist, these are appropriated by the business tycoons which are increasingly following the business models of the mainstream channels. Strangely, regional channels like AVT Khyber and Sindh TV focus more on national and international news as compared to regional issues, which often leads to the negligence of important

problems. Such negligence creates alienation among local people and adversely affects national cohesion(Hussain, 2015a).

It is therefore imperative that PEMRA realize its responsibility and stress for more diversified and plural media content. This could be achieved if the restrictions on cross-media ownership must be implemented. Though all the media could not be easily pressured to serve in the form of socially

responsible journalism, local and regional media can be strengthened through financial assistance to highlight issues and problems of local nature. Pakistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society and regional media have huge potential to grow if it could be facilitated by PEMRA. The strong regional channels could promote an alternative discourse in the marketplace of ideas and democratize the polity—an ideal strongly missed in today's Pakistan.

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