

Unlimited Greed Brings Pakistan Media Under Overdue Scrutiny, Much Needed Axe

Shaheen Sehbai



THE LAST DECADE or so has seen the Pakistan media, especially the TV guys, grab immense power and unmatched notoriety while making tons of money, mostly undeserved.

All this was done, in most cases, while blatantly flouting basic media ethics. Some media houses had actually started believing and publicly claiming they were kingmakers and could make or overthrow any government.

Not so anymore. The 2018 general election saw this media role at its best, or probably the worst.

Ruling politicians and greedy business tycoons who fraudulently acquired massive government lands, contracts, favours and kickbacks, dumped billions on the media believing that it will shield them from the law and from all sorts of accountability, if ever it happened.

They were wrong. The day of reckoning will come so soon, no one had imagined.

The people of Pakistan threw up a new leadership in 2018 and broke the iron-fist hold of political/business mobsters who were holding the country hostage for years.

Most importantly national institutions finally realized the danger to the country and stood up firmly to play their role.

The army and the judiciary joined hands with desperate citizens to challenge the deeply rotten status quo for the first time and rightly so.

As a result a new set up came into power and now details of how the politicians, tycoons and the media gurus gobbled up billions are emerging.

Since Imran Khan's PTI was not a partner in this mammoth national crime, it has no hesitation in releasing these details. Mindboggling figures are available.

Only the government media advertising was upwards of Rs50 billion. Big business houses dished out many more to buy the screens and self-proclaimed important people sitting behind these small screens.

The media was up for a grand loot sale.

Since the story thus emerging is about its own dirty linen, the media would never have told it. Thanks to the social media the shackles have been broken and information is now flowing freely.

Starting with the electronic media, as it has grown out of proportion and way too big for its shoes, one official list recently came out showing the rates at which 36 news TV channels were receiving ads from the government.

While the full list, issued by the Information Secretary, is available on the social media, a quick look shows Geo News was getting the highest rate of Rs290,500 per minute, Dunya TV was receiving Rs270,000, the seven channels getting Rs245,000 each were Abb Tak, ARY, Express, Roze News, Samaa, 92-News and Hum News. News One got Rs240,000.

Others rated over Rs200K included: 7-News (227.5K), Lahore News, Sindh TV, Neo News, KTN News, Khyber News, K-21, Dawn News, Din News, City-42, Capital TV, Apna TV (210K each).

Waseb TV had a rate of 190K, Business Plus (182K), Aaj News, Channel-24, Channel-5, Royal News, VSH (175K each), Such TV (147K), K-2 (140K), Star Asia (130K), GNN (122K), and the lowest 105K going to Punjab TV and Mashriq TV. Public TV was not yet rated.

These rates contain many big hidden stories about how the big, old and shrewd players used their clout and political influence to get astounding rates when their TV channels were almost non-entities or watched by very few.

Some names would be alien, like VSH, Star Asia, K-2 or K-21 to many. At least to me they sound fishy as VSH was getting the same rate as Aaj TV. Channel-24 and K-21 were in the same bracket as Dawn News and KTN. Could anyone imagine that?

Among new comers, the latest to come Hum News got a rate of 245K per minute, GNN received Rs122,500, and Public TV was not rated.

These rates existed until recently. Then the PTI government moved in and showed these channels a very shining reality mirror.

In the same list of old rates, the government proposed new rates with a cut ranging from 65 per cent to 98 per cent, or an average 70 per cent.

Federal Information Minister Fawad Choudhry told me an across-the-board cut was needed and was being applied.

But the proposed cuts tell us some hidden juicy stories, seen through the eyes of the government list.

For instance, whoever owns Roze News and Star Asia would have a heart attack if the new proposed rates were applied. From a per minute rate of Rs245,000 that Roze News was getting, the new rate will fall to just Rs5,000 or a cut of 98 percent. From Rs130,000 Star Asia comes down to Rs3,000 per minute.

Frankly speaking, a death sentence.

Why such drastic cuts? Someone will have to investigate, as the factors and stories behind it could involve possible scams or kickbacks.

Others who were also virtually cut to size in the first list will also protest and cry out loud. Like Geo came down to Rs89,000 from Rs290,500, Dunya from Rs270K to 75K, ARY from 245K to 91K (although it remained as the most viewed channel for about two years), Samaa 245K to 85K, Abb Tak 245K to 35K, Capital TV 225K to 25K, Dawn News 210K to 55K, 92-News and Hum News 245K to 45K, 7-News 227K to 12K, GNN of Gourmet Bakery will get only 22K against 122.5K. Express will get 65K cut from 245K.

Twenty-one channels out of 36 were cut to 25K or less. Of these 11 were getting more than 200K. How these channels got into the big league in the first place would require a close look into their owners, their political affiliations, their non-political masters or others giving them big rates for cuts or kickbacks.

For an average reader of this story, in a talk show of 60 minutes, if government advertised for 10 minutes at 200K per minute, it would mean Rs2 million. If 10 top channels have three talk shows daily with known anchors, it would mean 30 shows. A minimum of Rs2 million each show means Rs60 million daily. This figure would not include the dozens of other channels, which also got a big piece of the pie.

This rough calculation shows at least Rs25 to Rs30 billion were given away to the media every year routinely and in the last few years this figure had shot up through the sky.

So those who previously got the biggest chunk of this big cake are now going to shout the loudest.

When the Supreme Court of Pakistan and then the PTI government cut these ads and started talking of new rates, the crowd of owners, nay media moguls, who own and control the TV channels, the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) immediately came out and as expected started crying out loud, as if their collective mother had died.

The big media houses dominate the PBA but many unknown channels are there because they are cronies and sidekicks, but crucial voters for the big players. In return they were getting big rates for doing nothing.

How could then Rose TV get a rate of 245K when Dawn was getting only 210K? VSH, Royal News and Waseb were getting 175K, 175K and 190K each, equal to or more than Aaj TV.

So these stats had more to do with the politics of PBA than the viewer ratings they were getting. That was basically a big scam.

The ratings process is itself a big question mark and my next report in this series will cover this subject.

The immediate reaction of the government was to engage these channels in a dialogue, as it was obvious that this injured monster will hit back and try to hurt the PTI government, as bad as it could.

The turning point had come when the superior courts moved in and started pressing these channels to reveal their incomes, assets, taxes paid

and expenditures. The courts moved in because, as the first blackmailing tactic, the big houses refused to pay salaries and wages to their workers.

The workers were being used as pawns to pressurize the government. They quickly went to the Supreme Court and Justice Saqib Nisar heard their voice.

When Geo and other big houses were asked to show their tax returns and their assets, mountains fell on all heads. If they are under microscope now, others will be soon.

As another pressure tactic Geo announced a 20 per cent cut in salaries of all receiving more than Rs100,000. But this was another goody and a deception as Geo could, and can, continue to pay all its workers double the present wages, and for ages. It has ocean-deep pockets.

How much of the assets would be revealed is a big question but I know as an employee in the Jang Group when I joined first in 2000, in Karachi the Jang Building on I.I. Chundrigar Road and a couple of other buildings were owned by Jang. Then the number started growing and when I left almost all the plazas in nearby lanes were bought out and big iron gates were placed to stop any outsider from entering the lanes in the name of security.

It was almost like the grabbing drama enacted by Asif Ali Zardari around his Bilawal House in Clifton, Karachi where all other neighbors were forced to sell their properties to Zardari at miserly rates and the entire neighborhood was cordoned off.

Likewise the courts asked all channels about the source of their investments and why they had started TV channels, the answers are yet to come but would be really exciting.

Chief Justice Saqib Nisar had himself observed that many of the channels were launched to protect black money.

As a media worker I know why many groups jumped into the TV business. To own a TV channel was thought to be the easiest and the safest way to protect their money, legal or illegal and to get instant clout and political influence.

Hence tycoon Malik Riaz tried his best to become a channel owner and his interests in some groups and anchors were obvious. A crony of Asif Ali Zardari, who worked in FIA and found a goldmine, started the Capital TV. Every newspaper group launched its own news TV. Dunya owners had their money diverted from education and bucks made when Mian Amer was

in government. Lakhani sold tobacco and launched Express TV basically to counter the power of Jang Group and Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman. The source of money of BOL TV is still under investigation. Why have the bakery owners come into this business is not yet clear.

How many people know who are the owners of Such TV, Neo News, VSH, 7-News, Star Asia, Mashriq TV, K-2, K-21, Apna TV, Punjab TV, Roze News, Abb Tak TV?

A member of the PBA frankly admitted even he did not know who owned many channels like VSH or K-21.

Many genuine billionaire groups came to the media to gain political influence and clout. Some owners who I know, would get overly excited if they got a call from the PM or the President's House. If they were somehow ignored, the tones of their anchors would become sharply critical until the next call came.

All these businessmen, and many more, have enjoyed their investments and profited immensely.

But now the good old days are slipping away, at least until Imran Khan stays on his present course. How long can he do so is a question as he needs the media as well.

When the PBA made a lot of noise, government began discussions on a new ads formula with PBA. The talks are continuing. Some TV channels refused to run government ads in protest.

Minister Fawad Choudhry says notwithstanding any new formula to categorize these channels into A, B or C category, the slashed rates would not be raised to the previous level. He still maintains there would be an average cut of about 70 per cent. PBA disputes these claims.

Part of the new formula is to list all TV channels in three categories with varying rates. For Cat-A channels Rs140,000 per minute, for Cat-B Rs100,000 and for Cat-C Rs50,000 per minute is being proposed.

There is no agreement yet as the media tycoons will not give in easily.

Even if these slightly higher rates are agreed to, many channels will go out of business, especially those, which have no viewership and cannot get private sector ads.

But the key to issuing these ads would still remain with the Government.

The most important factor would be the monitoring of the channels to determine the ratings. A new system of carrying out the viewership survey is being discussed, as the previous one was grossly manipulated.

If there is no hanky panky in the new ratings system, the real worth of each channel will come out and Pakistani media would be on its way to become a stable and credible institution.

Only a government free of corruption can, however, perform this important national service.

There is also talk of a new regulatory authority which means Pemra as it exists today, will be no more. The Federal Cabinet has already approved the creation of this new media body, which could regulate the entire media, not just the TV channels. So newspapers, the social media and TV could all come under one discipline.

Whether the PTI Government succeeds in taming this wild monster will have to be seen but what is certain is that the flowering spring season for the TV is coming to an end.

Those who really perform and earn their living by producing quality, instead of political trash, will survive. Ethics will be a key ingredient of the new menu.

Likewise the days of the big anchors are also being counted. Already their movements have started from one channel to another and their huge multi-million salaries are being slashed. Many are rushing to launch personal You-Tube channels.

Minister Fawad Choudhry also thinks the next generation media will be digital and he estimates about Rs7 billion of government ads could be going only to the digital outlets, if they have viewership and following.

In short, its time for the old media to wind up and newcomers to jump in.

Note: This is Part-1 of a multi-part series. Other parts will cover politics of big media houses, the role and quality of grossly over-rated TV anchors, the corrupted Ratings system, the future of digital TV vs traditional media, and much more. Stay tuned.