

It's the economy, stupid

IT seems as if the media is a story as big as the latest suo motu case in Pakistan. From the censorship, to the financial crunch to sensationalism to the thappars outside the studio to the role it should be playing, ie reporting the truth vs reporting the positive truth, it has all become part of the story.

But, over the years there has been a significant shift. In the post-2008 period, this navel-gazing seemed to focus on the transgressions — or as they were seen — of the electronic media. It seemed as if the community itself could not stop worrying about the dropping standards in the world of fast-paced news gathering and reporting, the breaking news culture of television and the talk show culture which thrived on noise and rhetoric. In past years, however, this has become less of an obsession as the industry, and the profession has come under increasing pressure from the state. By now, few can deny that the freedom of expression has come under attack and has been bruised and battered. Rightly, there is great concern.

But in the confusion, the earlier debate of journalistic standards seems to have been overshadowed. Yet it is one that needs to be revived — because it's worth considering if it's not inextricably linked with the issue of press freedom and state pressures.

This came to mind when on a recent show on media freedom, the host — Asad Rahim — asked about the economic model of scores of news channels. The past year has highlighted this as it seems that shrinking press freedom has gone hand in hand with channels (and even newspapers) struggling with shrinking government (in particular) and private-sector ad revenue.

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Is there a link between the two, especially government revenue and press freedom? There has to be — a financially weak press, be it news channels or newspapers, can prove to be more pliable. We have witnessed this time and again, the present being no exception. Pressed for cash, managements will not risk upsetting anyone powerful if it means the cash flow may worsen. After a while, when salaries are not being paid or slashed, even journalists have few qualms about not crossing red lines.

And now consider what happens if the source of the cash flow is not spread out. It means that struggling managements will be amenable to 'instructions' coming from the few paymasters. In other words, controlling news becomes easy for those who can control or influence the revenue.

This abstract idea takes on ugly aspects in the Pakistani context. The news channels were heavily — some would say mainly — dependent on government revenue; it was said that the

rates charged were much higher than what the private sector coughed up. No wonder then that as soon as the government decided to reduce its advertising, the entire industry went into a downsizing spree. That it followed months after the government's decision, showed how precariously balanced the finances are. But, apart from blaming the government, there was little introspection or debate as to what this means for journalism standards or ethics.

If there is essentially one paymaster — and it's not the viewer — which management would be interested in good journalism? Or original content, be it exclusive reporting or programming? No one has the patience to find out if it will attract viewers and consequently advertising; building a reputation for good and credible journalism takes years. It is easier and quicker to simply ensure that the one player with deep pockets is kept happy and keeps the show running. And this had consequences — even when we were sure that the pressures on the media were not so suffocating. Mere tacit pressure was exerted to ensure that certain red lines were not crossed; it was tacit because carrots were used rather than the stick. Journalism suffered. But we rarely made the connection.

It's worth considering why ugly incidents on talk shows became the order of the day — with scores of channels, a flawed system to judge viewers, and ad revenue dependent on everything but who and how many are watching, credible and informed discussions are not going to get attention. That requires time. But one ugly incident gets everyone talking. It makes sure a name is noticed and a reputation and celebrity-hood acquired. The Pied Piper will also take note.

In this environment, few (if any) will want a professional editor to run affairs. His — there are few hers — decision-making will not be based on such concerns so its best that such people be left out of the loop, or the organisation altogether. Indeed, the economics, or rather the lack of it, of our industry has also directly impacted the direction that journalism has taken. And neither will be fixed in isolation of the other. Eventually, it will link to the third issue of state pressures. For only if a news organisation has a varied and decentralised revenue stream (which in itself is linked to those reading or watching it) will it be in a position to resist state pressure for a while. Because it will view its audience as the priority.

This is not just theory. The paper that this is being published in proves this. As the leading paper in the English-language market, it is one of the few news organisations which the private sector is willing to pay big bucks for. And this enables the paper — unlike many of its contemporaries — to resist state pressure for some time. Simple economics allows it do so.

And it is also the same domination of the market that compels the paper to maintain its credibility and reputation by hiring professional editors and maintaining a distance between the editorial and management. The paper knows that its readers expect a credible paper and only certain institutional practices can ensure this.

Now consider that in over 70 years, only one paper has been able to do this — in a market which has at best offered around five English-language papers at a time. In contrast, it's hard to keep count of the news channels.

Can economics provide a way to face our many challenges?

The writer is a journalist.