



Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives



INDEPENDENT AND RESPONSIBLE MEDIA:

What are the complaints of readers, listeners and viewers?
How these complaints can be addressed?



Dedicated to those journalists who bravely laid down their lives or who were subjected to torture by the state and non-state actors in the course of performing their duty of realizing peoples' right to information.

10. In the background of challenging law and order situation, media organizations must take effective steps to protect working journalists, who should be offered appropriate insurance packages as well as security related equipment.
11. Media organizations must work with PEMRA to develop and implement minimal compulsory standards, which should be legally enforceable.
12. PEMRA must be reconstituted to give adequate representations to representatives of media and civil society organizations in order to make it an independent and a credible media regulator.
13. Scope of PEMRA law must be expanded to cover the state controlled electronic media as well.
14. Government must stop maintaining secret funds, which are used to bribe journalists and media organizations. All government policies and practices vis-a-vis media should be completely transparent and open to public scrutiny.
15. Government must repeal the Official Secrets Act 1923. Furthermore, Federal and provincial governments must take immediate steps to enact comprehensive legislation on peoples' right to information.

CONCLUSIONS

CPDI believes that media organizations and associations have the capacity to address most of the concerns highlighted in this publication. Therefore, there should be no government interference in media affairs beyond enforcing certain minimal standards, which should be consistent with international best practices. However, it is imperative that media organizations on their own take serious and proactive steps to build mechanisms for self accountability and address the weaknesses identified in this publication. Any delay in this regard will undermine the credibility of media, which would make it difficult to protect the freedom and independence of media in the long run.



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The secrets funds of all types, which are currently managed by the Ministry of Information, must be scrapped. The government has no right whatsoever to use taxpayers money to benefit favourite journalists and media houses in a non-transparent manner.

5. Journalists face difficulties in terms of accessing information from government departments, which undermine their ability to efficiently work for peoples' right to information. It is because of the fact that successive governments have failed to repeal the Official Secrets Act 1923. Furthermore, Pakistan lacks comprehensive right to information legislation. The federal and provincial governments must immediately repeal the Official Secrets Act 1923 and enact effective right to information laws.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Media organizations must appoint professional editors, who should be given adequate space and autonomy to perform their responsibilities in line with media related standards and recognized norms.
2. Media organizations must proactively disclose maximum information about their policies [e.g. regarding any ideological commitment, hiring and firing of staff, advertisements, quality control, etc.], staff, revenues, circulation, standards, values, taxes, annual reports, audit reports and procedures regarding disposal of complaints of readers, listeners or viewers.
3. Media organizations must ensure that journalists are paid decent salaries in a timely manner and any complaints in this regard are efficiently redressed.
4. All the editors, senior reporters and anchor persons should declare their assets each year for public information.
5. Media organizations and associations must establish a credible system to deal with complaints of malpractices, blackmail, misreporting and corruption on the part of journalists and other staff of media organizations.
6. Media organizations must take steps to provide necessary resources and develop capacities for investigative reporting.
7. Media organizations must work together to establish a comprehensive code of conduct, besides providing a credible system whereby any violations of code of conduct could be taken up to hold the responsible media persons accountable and to compensate the aggrieved persons, parties or institutions.
8. Media organizations must take steps to reduce the prices of media products in order to ensure that maximum people can benefit from media products. In this regard, the government must facilitate the media but in a transparent and equitable manner.
9. Media organizations must establish effective partnerships with media related departments of universities and arrange for appropriate trainings of young and mid-career journalists.

of the Pakistan Armed Forces. Therefore, instead of being hoodwinked by the faces and slogans of these terrorists, the nation needs to be told that these terrorists are the enemies of Islam, humanity and the state of Pakistan.

In the wake of 2010 floods, media reporters launched a vicious campaign of criticism against politicians. Although performance of some of the politicians was lacking and deserved criticism, many politicians were present in the flood affected areas and were rendering great services. However, the overall impression given by the media was that all the politicians were bad and that they had failed. Journalists forgot that, unlike military, the politicians did not have immense resources, helicopters, transport facilities and the workforce at their disposal. Yet, in many of their reports, reporters continued to compare the activities undertaken by the military with the work done by the politicians, and kept on presenting military as a separate institution as if it was not part of the government.

OTHER ISSUES

1. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) lacks credibility and has failed to deliver in terms of protecting the rights of listeners and viewers. Its role can be made effective and credible by including in its Board reputed personalities from amongst the senior journalists and civil society organizations. PEMRA must play an effective role and ensure strict implementation of internationally recognized basic standards and values by the media.
2. PEMRA must be reconstituted in such a manner to minimize the influence of government and other official institutions on its decision making. This is necessary to ensure that no unfair restrictions could be imposed on free speech and peoples' right to information.
3. PEMRA law should be extended to cover the government run TV channels and radio stations as well. This is important to ensure that media across the board follows uniform standards under one regulatory framework.
4. The entire decision making process in the government regarding media and journalists must be completely transparent.

At times, journalists and media owners are found arguing that their performance should only be judged by the readers, listeners or viewers; and there is no need for any kind of interference from any regulatory body. They argue that, if a certain media house performs well, people would benefit from its products. Otherwise, they will switch to the other channels or publications. If we accept this logic, then there should be no minimal compulsory standards for food items, medicines and electrical appliances too. If people would like a certain medicine, they will buy it. Otherwise, they would opt for another brand. The fact is that, as in developed countries, we need minimal compulsory standards for media reporting and products, although the mechanism for implementation should be independent, neutral and effective so that there is little room for unreasonable government interference. As a sub-standard medicine can cause serious harm, a false and irresponsible media report can also have serious consequences for personal lives, business and politics.

3. It is alleged by informed circles that some of the investigative reports that are published or telecast are not necessarily the products of initiatives and hard work of journalists themselves. Sometimes, ready-made reports are provided to selected journalists by some individuals or institutions to achieve their vested interests at the time of their own choosing. Though these reports have a utility in terms of informing people about certain issues, however, there is always the danger lurking in the shadows that some elements want to achieve their own goals through publication of such 'investigative' reports, which might not be necessarily in the collective interest of the public.

4. People's right to privacy is not adequately considered in reporting incidents pertaining to terrorist attacks. Sometimes, dead bodies and severely wounded persons are shown on TV channels, which is against human dignity and recognized human rights.

5. While reporting on issues pertaining to women, it is not considered as to what kind of influences a particular report would have on the domestic, social or professional life of the woman.

In June 2010, a young Pakistani student was killed in riots in Kirghizstan. After a few days, his dead body was to be flown back to Pakistan. During this time, journalists, especially some of the TV reporters, would persistently visit the home of the deceased man and ask the grieving sister and the mother weird questions. Is showing grieving family on TV an acceptable behaviour? Is it not against the dictates of privacy?

6. It is often complained that news items are published or telecast without proper investigation or confirmation of facts. Such an irresponsible behaviour is fraught with serious implications. And yet, media organizations do not hold the responsible journalists accountable in any way.

7. While criticising elected representatives, journalists often adopt aggressive and irresponsible behaviour and rather than collecting facts with an open mind, they report on the basis of preconceived notions. Such an uncalled for and unbalanced behaviour results in weakening the democratic institutions. Journalists tend to forget that media independence is intrinsically linked with the stability and strengthening of democratic institutions.

8. Black sheep present amongst the journalists are giving bad name to the journalistic fraternity. It is because of these black sheep that many people address journalists as black-mailers. People also talk about Lifafa journalism and many commercial banks are reluctant to issue credit cards to journalists. In the collective interest of their own profession and to protect peoples' right to information, organizations of journalists should take action against such black sheep.

9. Many journalists give the impression through their reporting as if those involved in terrorism are heroes or as if they are involved in heinous crimes for some great cause. Doing so, they forget that no one can be greater enemy of Islam and humanity than those who kill innocent people including women and children. They also forget that these terrorists have caused damage to national assets including installations

Journalists' fraternity, human rights organizations and democracy loving citizens have struggled hard for a long time for media freedom in Pakistan. As a result of this struggle, it seems that a national consensus has finally been developed under which it is not possible for any government to put restrictions on media freedom. Now, media organizations are making full use of this freedom. As a consequence, media now identifies and highlights many issues and concerns, which were difficult to bring to the fore in the days of media restrictions. Owing to this media freedom, different schools of thought have the liberty and freedom to openly express their opinions on various issues of public importance. This gives the public at large an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of issues of national importance from different angles. Such a freedom of expression is only possible through free media; and it is extremely useful in sustaining and developing democratic societies.

Media freedom should not be construed as the freedom to write and speak for the journalists alone. In fact, it means such a freedom whereby citizens could have timely access to correct information and their freedom of expression could be protected. However, if the media starts providing incorrect information or indulges in biased reporting, or if media organizations are riddled with anomalies which restrict journalists in performing their duties honestly and independently, then the whole concept of media freedom is undermined. That is why it is necessary that media should not only be independent but such mechanisms need to be put in place which ensure responsible role of media.

While independence of media is important, it is also necessary that media should perform its functions in a responsible, transparent and efficient manner. Recently, on the one hand, praises have been heaped upon the performance of media and, on the other hand, critical questions have also been raised and many circles opine that, in many respects, the role of media is negative and irresponsible. In this context, journalist fraternity, human rights organizations and democracy loving people should, apart from protecting the independence of media, also play their roles to make media institutions transparent, responsible and corruption free.

MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS AND RELATED COMPLAINTS

Some of the complaints relating to media organizations, which include newspapers, magazines, radio stations and TV channels, are as under:

1. In many of newspapers and magazines, the owners or investors also serve as editors. Hence, the contents and policies of these newspapers and magazines are not usually managed by professional editors. As a result, it appears that, instead of observing journalistic values and standards, these publications end up serving the political and business interests of the owners.
2. In general, media houses do not advertise their policies pertaining to their organizations, nor do they ensure full compliance of these policies. Such policies should determine and pronounce as to what will be the editorial policy of a given media. Similarly, these policies should lay down the procedure, among others, for recruitment, suspension or dismissal, and protection of journalistic values and standards; besides providing a grievance redress mechanism in relation to the complaints made by readers, listeners, viewers or other stakeholders.

Salaries of most of the journalists associated with different media organizations are abysmally low and, at times, even these low salaries are not paid on time. On the other hand, some of the journalists and TV anchors are highly paid. The low paid journalists are often blamed for indulging in corruption, sensational reporting and violations of journalistic ethics in order to meet their basic needs. Even the prominent ones among the journalists and anchor persons indulge in sensational reporting in order to remain in the limelight, protect their perks and privileges and serve the business interests of owners, while throwing to the wind the journalistic values and standards. Their reporting is often melodramatic. At times, they lose the sense of proportion or balance in political reporting; and thus contribute to exacerbate the prevalent political crises. Their biased and flawed reporting, at times, causes or intensifies tension among different institutions of the state. If a politician or another stakeholder makes a statement aimed at lowering the political temperature, some of these journalists and anchor person look disappointed. If someone makes a hard hitting political statement, they aggravate political atmosphere by talking for hours on such a statement. This madness is not without method; beneath such behaviour lie the business interests of media owners. However, an impression is created as if all is being done in the interest of the common people. If interests of the common people were really of paramount importance, most of their programs would have pertained to education, health, employment, poverty, agriculture and women issues. And they would have highlighted these issues in a serious manner.

3. Many newspapers, magazines and TV channels do not pay regular salaries to their reporters at all or their salaries are extremely low, which are often not paid on time either. It is partly because of this that many of the reporters associated with these newspapers, magazines and TV channels indulge

in corrupt practices. They do not enjoy good reputation and are least interested in upholding journalistic values and standards. When complaints are lodged against such reporters, administration of these newspapers, magazines and TV channels is usually not willing to take any action.

In July 2010, Punjab Assembly passed a resolution to register its reservations against certain practises of media. Most of the media organizations declared this resolution to be anti-media and did not publish it. Journalists and media institutions protested against this resolution for several days. During the course of this protest, many journalists and anchor persons used insulting and sub-standard language against politicians and members of the Punjab Assembly. Later on, it transpired that the contents of the resolution did not contain anything, which could have been termed as objectionable. The complaint of media and journalists was essentially against the speeches made in the Punjab Assembly prior to the adoption of the resolution. From the standpoint of the common person, the use of insulting language by anchor persons and journalists was inappropriate. Moreover, not publishing the contents of the resolution amounted to depriving public of their right to information.

4. It is commonly alleged that many of the media organizations do not pay their taxes or other dues; and use the influence of their organizations to divert pressure. The role of media in this connection should have been exemplary and transparent so that no one could have the opportunity to raise finger at them.
5. There are media organizations whose newspapers or magazines have very limited circulation or number of their readers is virtually non-existent. But these organizations manage to get lots of benefits and advertisements from government institutions at the expense of tax payers' money. Media associations know very well about such malpractices involving both media houses and the relevant government departments. Media organizations should have identified such black sheep themselves and should have constituted self-regulatory mechanism to hold such organizations accountable. However, it seems that media organizations have developed a tacit understanding amongst themselves not to highlight such flaws, malpractices and corruption of each other. It is tantamount to depriving people from their right to know.

6. It is a common complaint that some of the media organizations are reluctant to give space to citizens' complaints against those companies or organizations, which offer advertisements to the media. Media organizations should adopt effective and transparent policies to deal with such complaints.

7. Media organizations either do not publish their annual reports or do not make them public. Such reports should be published by government departments, important private organizations and especially by media organizations so that their performance could be shared with the public in a transparent and effective manner. Audit reports pertaining to the financial matters of media houses should also be a

part of annual reports. This is how readers, listeners and viewers could know about the media organizations, which claim to be working on behalf of the public and exercise immense influence, and determine as to what are their sources of income, how much taxes do they pay and how much do they earn.

8. Media organizations do not publish on their websites information regarding administration, policies, financial matters, offices and the staff. As a result, it is difficult to get any information about the media organizations. At times, some people pass themselves on as journalists, although they are not associated with any media organization or the newspaper.
9. Organizations of the journalists have the tendency to protect journalists at all cost and show reluctance to admit the shortcomings and excesses of journalists. These organizations should have effective codes of conduct and, in cases of violations of these codes; strict action should be taken under a transparent and effective procedure.
10. Media organizations and associations of journalists have failed so far in developing and implementing an effective and comprehensive code of conduct, which explains as to why media has not been able to provide a satisfactory self-accountability mechanism. Moreover, viewers and readers do not have access to any effective mechanism under which they could have their grievances addressed.
11. In Pakistan, prices of newspapers and magazines are higher than those prevailing in the region. Moreover, without giving any consideration to their readers, many newspapers flood their front pages with advertisements. As a result, at times, little space is left on prominent pages for news items. Similarly, programs on TV channels are repeatedly interrupted for significant durations to show advertisements without following the relevant legal restrictions or any code of conduct. It would be stating the obvious that such an attitude is reflective of tendency to give primacy to business interests at the expense of citizens' right to information and freedom of expression.

12. Media organizations do not pay attention to the training of their employees. They should have either established training institutes themselves or they should have made effective arrangements for the training of students enrolled in mass communication or journalism courses in collaboration with media departments of universities.

For 11 years, our media kept on telling us that General Zia-ud-Din Butt, who was lawfully appointed as Chief of Army Staff (COAS) by the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999, was a junior General and that he did not have the experience of commanding any army corps. This false information was used to justify General Pervez Musharraf's coup against the elected civilian government. In 2010, it transpired that he was the senior most general after General Musharraf, who was dismissed by the Prime Minister and that he also had the experience of commanding Gujranwala Corps. The point to ponder is why these so many media organizations could not expose this lie by General Musharraf and his accomplices to the public? The truth is that some of the senior and supposedly reputed journalists were at the fore front in spreading this lie.

13. Many of the newspapers and magazines feel little hesitation in publishing advertisements in which information and claims made are clearly doubtful and of dubious in nature.
14. In recent past, many journalists have either been killed or subjected to severe torture in the course of performing their duties. However, media organizations have failed to offer them appropriate health or life insurance packages to protect them and their families.
15. In the face of terrorism incidents, journalists working in hard areas should be provided appropriate equipment whereby they could ensure their safety. However, so far, media organizations have paid little attention to this aspect.

As TV anchor persons greatly influence public opinion and governmental policies through their programs, people should have the right to have maximum and correct information about them. For example, people should have the right to know about their academic credentials and track of their past employments. Furthermore, people should also have access to information about their salaries, perks and privileges; as well as about what are the other sources of income of these anchor persons and what changes have been witnessed in the income and assets of these anchor persons and their families. Furthermore, it should be made binding on these anchorpersons to declare their assets on annual basis and tell the public as to how many plots they have acquired after being associated with the profession of journalism and how many foreign trips they have undertaken. As a matter of principle, the more one is influential in the public arena, the more his or her matters should be transparent, especially when such people have the ability and the opportunity to influence public opinion and government policies.

ISSUES PERTAINING TO REPORTING

At times, the reports broadcast or published by newspapers, magazines and TV channels are bereft of moral values and standards. Such issues occur in greater frequency in Urdu language newspapers, though some of the English newspapers are not far behind in terms of sensationalising the news. In this context, some of issues need to be mentioned, which are as follows:

1. It is responsibility of the journalists to present the news item in a correct and an unbiased manner to their viewers, listeners and readers. However, many a time journalists colour the news item with their own thoughts and opinions or present the news item in such a way that their own bias is clearly reflected.
2. Very few investigative reports are published or telecast. Most of the time, attention is focussed on the statements made or opinions expressed by influential figures. Furthermore, media organizations do not provide necessary resources or facilities to journalists for investigative reporting.