Media Democracy

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Preface

Journalism is supposed to provide a quality of information, and a wide range of perspectives and voices, to promote participation in public discussion. But, with every passing day, journalism, now generally known as media, is more and more driven by marketing and commercial pressures rather than an ethic of public service.

More and more people are concluding that dominant, agenda-setting, mainstream (elitist) media are a key obstacle to progressive social change. Besides, lack of a tradition of media criticism in Pakistan deprives the media organizations themselves of a mechanism for correction and reform.

Media have, in many ways, become the power structure and is positioned to exploit its enormous influence to advance both its own agenda and those of its government-business allies. The great mass of people (workers, peasants, artistes, students etc.) has minimal say on the major public issues of the day.

Public awareness, that commercial media have failed us, increases day by day. That is why people are agitating, and media outlets losing their credibility. Now, it is time to debate whether the people should--and can--demand a new commitment to openness not just by the governments but the commercial media as well.

Society for Alternative Media and Research (SAMAR) has been struggling for the past four years to bring forth people's perspective in mainstream media that promotes broad-based democratic debate and action. We believe that in the absence of real background scholarship, media are vulnerable to the myopia of current events and immediacy.

To promote the concepts and ideas for seeking participation in public discussion, SAMAR is presenting its first publication on “Media Democracy” which is a concept as well as an advocacy movement aiming at making the mainstream media more plural, and reflective of a broad set of ideas and opinions.

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Mazhar Arif,
Executive Director

What is Media Democracy ?

As a concept, it disapproves the way media 'creates' stories, hooks everyone to the 'news' and distorts the public perceptions about the everyday happenings; as a movement, media democracy calls for a struggle to reform the existing media and present the alternatives models to contest the monopoly of media outlets as sole arbiters of news, infotainment and awareness.

It is also a campaign to democratize the society and government, and make the media conglomerates more responsive to peoples' aspirations rather than representatives of big interests and groups that always feel threatened by an enlightened and informed public.

Despite a lot of literature available on the topic of Media Democracy and quite an informed debate among its various proponents, a universal and consensus definition of the phrase is not available. People say media democracy means to make media more democratic towards the needs of the people and more responsible in giving out information.

They also say media is public property, as it sneaks into their cozy homes uninvitingly and cause a stir in their private thoughts and sentiments. So, it is but natural that it should also cater for the needs of the people it disturbs, and stop playing just as a mouth piece of a few 'dirty rich' who try to manipulate ideas and things for their petty and vested interests.

Media democracy is a concept as well as an advocacy movement aiming at making the mainstream media more plural, and reflective of a broad set of ideas and opinions than churning out and propagating just routine socio-politico-economic news stories and articles in the name of news, information and entertainment.

They also agree that media democracy stands for a model production and dissemination instrument that encourages mass media system that aims at informing and empowering the 'people' and spreading democratic values and culture.

The difficulty of casting the concept into one agreeable definition arises due to predisposed mental affiliations. A market liberal

believes that the state, society, government and their coercive instrument should not be allowed to infringe on the media's intrinsic role as 'chief judge' of what should be printed/ broadcast or not. They believe that market is the best judge for the so called 'right and wrong' and the media houses failing to keep upto market aspiration would be left out in their survival struggle and would eventually die a natural death.

They argue that modern market forces and media grew side by side and survived the public and governmental onslaught due to their intrinsic ability to mould according to market and pubic sentiments. They believe that even any rudimentary discourse to fetter media freedom would tantamount to repression of right of speech. They say the media freedom is equivalent to the freedom of speech enjoyed by an individual and his/her right of expression cannot be curtailed at any cost.

Media democracy advocates also argue that corporate ownership and commercial pressures influence media content, sharply limiting the range of news, opinions, and entertainment the citizens receive. They call for a more equal distribution of economic, social, cultural, and information capital, which would lead to a more informed citizenry, as well as a more enlightened, representative political discourse.

A leading proponent of this view is Noam Chomsky, who in his “Media and democracy” argues that the concept of 'democratizing the media' has no real meaning within the terms of political discourse in the United States. In fact, the phrase has a paradoxical or even vaguely subversive ring to it. Citizen participation would be considered an infringement on freedom of the press, a blow struck against the independence of the media that would distort the mission they have undertaken to inform the public without fear or favor... this is because the general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and driven from the arena of political debate and action, if democracy is to survive.

Medai Democrcy is a complex term but broadly the notion means: that the health of the democratic political system depends on the efficient, accurate, and complete transmission of social, political, and cultural information in society; that the media are the conduits of this information and should act in the public interest; that the mass media have increasingly been unable and

uninterested in fulfilling this role due to increased concentration of ownership and commercial pressures; and that this undermines democracy as voters and citizens are unable to participate knowledgably in public policy debates. Hence, the media should be more democratic as its role is as a representative of people's opinions, views, liking, disliking and, above all, their interests.

A related element of this concept examines the lack of representation of a diversity of voices and viewpoints, particularly of those who have traditionally been marginalized by mass media (workers, peasants, students, teachers etc) and that without an informed and engaged citizenry, policy issues become defined by political and corporate elites.

British and European Cultural Studies has spawned a range of alternative definitions of 'media democracy', including the idea that media audiences are the source of a new form of creative cultural politics. These are not simply audiences of public, Internet or alternative media, but include mass media audiences as well. This radical idea suggests that a cultural democracy emerges through the everyday experiences and meaning-making of audiences. Clearly, such a notion of media democracy extends the familiar concept of institutionally-derived representative democracy.

Media Democracy differs from similar and related concepts such as Citizen Media, Democartic Media, Independent Media, Alternative Media and Media Literacy. The broader purpose of these cponcepts may be same but they are mutusally exclusive and also differ from the idea of Media Democarcy.

Why Media Democracy?

James Madison warned more than two centuries ago, “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.”

Madison wrote those words in the first years of the 19th century, but they still ring true in the first years of the 21st.

More and more people are concluding that the dominant, agenda-setting big media is a problem for democracy and a key obstacle to positive social change.

> With every passing day media had become more and more integrated into the profit-making imperatives of national and trans-national conglomerates and more and more driven by marketing and commercial pressures rather than an ethic of public service. And it is more and more shaped by the corporate agenda and its neo-liberal ideology of slashing taxes for the wealthy and public services for the poor.

According to the civics textbooks, journalism is supposed to provide a quality of information, and a wide range of perspectives and voices, to promote participation in public discussion and informed citizenship. But behind the buzzwords of the day- convergence, global competitiveness, de-regulation, consumer choice- the reality is a media system with fewer and fewer owners controlling more and more media outlets.

No wonder the American writer Robert McChesney (author of Rich Media, Poor Democracy; and Corporate Media & the Threat to Democracy) says: Regardless of what a progressive group's first issue of importance is, its second issue should be media and communication, because so long as the media are in corporate hands, the task of social change will be vastly more difficult, if not impossible, across the board.

Features of Media Democracy

A key idea of media democracy is that the concentration of media ownership in recent decades in the hands of a few companies and individuals has led to a narrowing of the range of voices and opinions being expressed in the mass media; to an increase in the commercialization of news and information; to a hollowing out of the news media's ability to conduct investigative reporting and act as the public watchdog; and to an increase of emphasis on the bottom line, which prioritizes infotainment celebrity news over informative discourse.

Public broadcasting is as an important counterweight to commercial media, and as such, it is a key element of media democracy. Since public television and radio broadcasters are usually funded by government and/or individual donations, they are not subject to the same commercial pressures as private broadcasters and are therefore an important source of a more diverse and in-depth media content. However, in many countries, public broadcasters are subject to funding instability, which jeopardizes their ability to fulfill their public service role consistently.

As a response to the shortcomings of the mainstream media, proponents of media democracy often advocate supporting and engaging in independent and alternative media in both print and electronic forms. Through citizen journalism and citizen media individuals can produce and disseminate information and opinions that are marginalized by the mainstream media. In the book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People, Dan Gillmore urges* individuals who are concerned about media ownership concentration and the decreasing amount of public-interest broadcasting to use alternative media to create and distribute information they believe is not properly reported in the mainstream news media.

Media Consolidation hurts Democracy

There's nothing natural or inevitable about the profit-driven commercial media system we have today. In fact, the world over big business has fought hard for it, spending billions of dollars to marginalize more democratic alternatives and squelch public debate.

Consolidation tends to result in newsroom layoffs, budget cuts and a web of conflicts of interest for reporters, who are often employed by the same companies they're supposed to cover. Forget the old adage that journalism is a public service. These days news has become just another commodity with aim to turn a profit.

As in Pakistan, the media industry is also one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington. Take campaign finance reform, which has garnered support across the political spectrum, but is opposed by many media companies. Why? Much of the money raised for political campaigns is given to corporate media to buy advertising.

Democracy requires independent, critical and genuinely representative media. Without them, citizens lose the means to participate in the debate that sets the political agenda. Yet there's little public discussion of media policy. After all, where would it occur? The mass media would be a perfect venue-but don't hold your breath.

According to the Center for Public Integrity, big media spent nearly 11 million dollars from 1996-1998 to defeat bills mandating free airtime for candidates. The Alliance for Better Campaigns estimates that broadcasters earned at least 771 million dollars from political TV ads in 2000, almost double the 1996 revenues. Broadcasters work the other side of the game as well, donating millions of dollars in “soft money” to the major political parties.

People believe that taking back the media means taking back democracy. Public awareness, that commercial media have

failed us, increases day by day. That's why people are agitating. The so-called “War on Terror” and the chilling of dissent that has come with it make the struggle for a vital and diverse press more crucial than ever.

Media Democracy Activism

In US media activism is taking off across the country and people are challenging deregulation in the courts, starting low power FM radio stations in their communities, forming networks to watchdog the commercial press, and integrating media reform into larger issues like the fight against corporate globalization.

The court' ruling effectively nullified the Federal Communications Commission's June 2003 decision to weaken a set of media ownership regulations.

The FCC's would have increased the number of television stations a single company could own in individual cities as well as nationwide. It also would have allowed cross-ownership of both newspapers and broadcast stations in the same community.

A July 2004 ruling on media ownership by a federal appeals court in Philadelphia handed a victory to grassroots activists working for media democracy, and delivered a defeat to the Bush administration and to the small handful of corporations who own or distribute most of what Americans see, hear, and read.

Prior to the June 2003 FCC decision, hundreds of thousands of citizens sent in e-mails, postcards, and letters opposing the proposed deregulation on the grounds that consolidation is harmful to diversity. The FCC issued its weakened ownership rules anyway, on a 32 vote spearheaded by Chairman Michael Powell.

A nationwide network of grassroots community groups mobilized public opposition to the planned deregulation and pushed Congress and the federal courts to block the new rules. Congress launched several attempts to repeal aspects of the FCC decision or to completely overturn it, but none succeeded entirely.

The legal case was brought by a Philadelphia-based grassroots group the Prometheus Radio Project in conjunction with the Media Access Project, a public interest law firm based in Washington, D.C.

The Third Circuit Court rejected Powell's position that unless the FCC could demonstrate that a particular ownership regulation remained necessary to the public good, it should be swept away. The FCC ought not to use its biennial reviews as a “one-way ratchet” toward deregulation, the court said. The FCC might in fact find that “the public interest calls for a more stringent regulation,” the court noted, rather than a loosening of ownership caps.

While the court didn't object to every aspect of the FCC's June 3 decision, it remanded the entire decision to the FCC for reconsideration, citing numerous inconsistencies and an overall lack of transparency in the FCC's methods and logic. The court also rebuked the FCC for failing to provide more public notice of its planned review of the ownership rules. Grassroots groups have launched a campaign for the FCC to hold official public hearings in all 50 states before further altering the ownership rules.

Media Democracy Day (MD Day)

Since 1996, there have been several efforts by concerned citizens and media activists to build coalitions to make the media more democratically accountable in the US as well as Canada.
Initially MD Day was organized by local Toronto and Vancouver groups of the CPBF modeled after its British namesake, a coalition of groups which came together in 1996 to challenge Conrad Black's takeover of much of Canada's press, and the threat to diversity posed by media concentration. Early supporters included the Council of Canadians, the CEP union, the Canadian Media Guild, the Graphic Communications International Union, the CLC, and the Periodical Writers Association.
Today, the tradition of MD Day is carried on by local citizens and student groups in Canada and around the world. Events were organized in 2001 in Toronto, Vancouver and Kitchener-Waterloo Canada. In 2002 activist events were held in cities around the world.
Examples include: Workshops and keynote speaker at the Vancouver Public Library organized by the Campaign for Press and Broadcast Freedom. In 2003 there were assorted events in Toronto and Vancouver.

MD Day of action is based on three themes:

- Education - understanding how the media shapes our world and our democracy;
- Protest - against a media system based on commercialization and exclusiveness;
- Change - calls for media reforms that respond to public interests, promote diversity, and ensure community representation and accountability.

Media Regulators

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in US is supposed to make sure media serve the public, but all too often it works hand in glove with the industries it's supposed to watchdog. Crucial communications policy is being made with little public debate, and the results are no surprise: a flood of media mergers that threatens independent journalism and weakens democracy.

The FCC regulates interstate communications that run over radio, TV, wire, satellite or cable. Its authority is based on the idea that its decisions will serve the “public interest, convenience or necessity.” The public owns the airwaves that radio and TV stations use and profit from. Media companies are allowed to use them on the condition that they serve the public; it's part of the FCC's job to enforce that.

The FCC's record of standing up for the public has rarely been impressive. Under the leadership of free market zealot Michael Powell, the agency seems to had given up even trying. Shortly after his appointment as chair, a reporter asked Powell what the public interest is. Powell replied, "I have no idea."

Media giants love Powell-- the Nation Association of Broadcasters called him “an outstanding choice.” The affection seems to be mutual, with Powell referring to broadcast corporations as “our clients,” denouncing regulation as “the oppressor,” and proudly stating "my religion is the market.”

The concentration has been encouraged by government deregulation and neo-liberal trade policies. For example, the US Telecommunication Act of 1996 discarded most media ownership rules that were previously in place, leading to massive consolidation in the telecommunications industry. Over 4,000 radio stations were bought out, and minority ownership of TV stations dropped to its lowest point since the federal government began tracking such data in 1990. In its review of the Telecommunication Act in

2003, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) further reduced restrictions and allowed media corporations to grow and expand into other areas of media.
One by one, public lost protections against media monopoly and the rules that prevented one TV network from buying another and that said a network couldn't own two stations in the same city and that kept one company from owning TV stations and cable franchises in a single market were either repealed or amended.

In US the Internet diversity is also at risk because the FCC recently ruled that cable companies can provide Internet access over their broadband lines without opening them to competitors. This increases the likelihood that the Internet will grow to resemble cable TV, where content is controlled by a handful of interconnected firms.

But big media still isn't satisfied. Broadcasters are now pushing for an end to cross-ownership rules, which are all that prevent newspapers from being absorbed by the broadcast industry. And thanks to the FCC's complacency, the rule that bars a company from owning TV stations which reach more than 35% of U.S. households seems to be on its way out. In short, the FCC is helping corporations to carve up the media landscape for private profit.

Here, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) has had opened floodgates of TV channels and they bombard the hapless people with their most low quality products round the clock. In Pakistan the situation is dismal as it had become the first country to allow cross-ownership of electronic and print media.

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra)

Pemra was established in 2002 through a presidential ordinance apparently to facilitate and regulate electronic media. The ordinance was amended through Pemra (Ordinance) Amendment Act of 2007 to make it more draconian and less democratic. Pemra Rules of 2002 are also important part of its functioning.

It is mandated to improve the standards of information, education and entertainment; enlarge the choice available to the people of Pakistan in the media for news, current affairs, religious knowledge, art, culture, science, technology, economic development, social sector concerns, music, sports, drama and other subjects of public and national interest; facilitate the devolution of responsibility and power to the grass roots by improving the access of the people to mass media at the local and community level; and ensure accountability, transparency and good governance by optimization of the free flow of information.

Pemra has only been successful in issuing licenses to various powerful individuals and groups for setting up TV channels and Radio stations. But in the process it allowed the cross ownership of media, creating indecent monopolies with renowned newspaper owners now owning major private TV channels and dishing out the news of their choice. Some of these owners have open political affiliations and do not hesitate to propagate the information aimed at scoring support for the people and groups of their choice. Pemra has failed to check it and its only utility remained in the arena of issuing licenses. In the later part of Musharraf regime, Pemra played a virtual subservient role to the dictator to gag his opponents, sealed TV channels and confiscated their equipments.

Is Democracy in Danger?

Three books offer an intriguing panorama of the crucial changes in the media over the past quarter century and the media's growing threat to democracy.

The first, published in 1996, is Kathryn S. Olmsted's *Challenging the Secret Government.* It examines the awakening of skepticism within the U.S. news media and the Congress in the mid-1970s. The second is Edward Herman's *The Myth of the Liberal Media*, which reviews the media's acquiescence to the Reagan administration's implausible propaganda during the 1980s. The third is Robert W. McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, a study of the rapid concentration of media power during the l990s.

Olmsted starts her story by pointing to the secret compromises that the Cold War brought to the ethics of the U.S. government. She quotes World War II Gen. James Doolittle explaining in a secret 1954 report to President Eisenhower why CIA covert operations were needed and what they entailed.

“Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply,” Doolittle wrote. “If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counter espionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by cleverer, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.”

While Eisenhower and later presidents did implement the first part of Doolittle's recommendation, ordering covert actions around the world, they finessed the latter. Rather than explain the choices to the American people, U.S. leaders dropped a cloak of state secrecy around 'this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.'

That cloak was lifted slightly in the mid-1970s. The Vietnam War had cracked the Cold War consensus and Watergate had exposed a parallel challenge to the democratic process. Into that breach stepped an energized press corps represented by investigative

journalists, such as The New York Times' Seymour Hersh and CBS News' Daniel Schorr, and a more assertive Congress personified by Sen. Frank Church, D-ldaho, and Rep. Otis Pike, D-N.Y.

The press and Congress exposed some of the secret government's worst abuses -from spying on U.S. citizens and disrupting their constitutionally protected rights to mounting assassination plots against foreign leaders and conducting drug tests on unsuspecting subjects.

Among the American people, there was shock. Olmsted quotes a letter that one woman wrote to Sen. Church. “Perhaps at 57 I should know better, but I really want our country to behave honorably. I never thought the ideals they taught us were just public relations.”
But, as Olmsted describes, the counterattacks from allies of the secret government were fierce and effective. Its defenders questioned the patriotism of the critics. Key news executives, such as The Washington Post's publisher Katharine Graham and The New York Times editor Abe Rosenthal, proved particularly amenable to CIA overtures for restraint and self-censorship.

Even senior government officials didn't want to know too much. At one point, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, who was heading up a White House-ordered investigation, told CIA director William Colby, "Bill, do you really have to present all this material to us?"

Though the congressional investigations managed to document an array of CIA and FBI abuses, Church and Pike faced unrelenting pressure. With the White House exploiting the murder of a CIA officer in Greece, the counterattack gained strength, eventually limiting what Church and Pike could accomplish. The House voted to suppress Pike's report and hauled Schorr before a hearing when he arranged for the publication of its leaked contents.

After Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, the national media and the Congress were brought to heel even more. Olmsted ends her book by quoting comments from senior editors about what one called the media's “new age of deference.” In 1982, another declared that “we should make peace with the government.... We should cure ourselves of the adversarial mindset”

In a sense, **Herman's** book picks up the story from there, though he also delves back into the modern media's evolution. But Herman's central point is the overriding fact of the media's self-censorship during the 1980s and early l990s.

Herman details, for instance, the stunning contrast between the media's handling of a fugitive Cuban-American terrorist, Luis Posada, and the anti-Western terrorist, Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, known as Carlos the Jackal.

> "These firms are run by wealthy managers and billionaires with clear stakes in the outcome of the most fundamental political issues, and their interests are often distinct from those of the vast majority of humanity. By any known theory of democracy, such a concentration of economic, cultural, and political power into so few hands -and mostly unaccountable hands at that -is absurd and unacceptable."

"For the Western media and Western experts, Carlos is the model terrorist and is portrayed without qualification as evil incarnate," Herman wrote. By contrast, the U.S. news media largely averted its eyes from Posada, a Cuban-American who worked for the CIA. Posada was implicated in the bombing of a civilian Cuban airliner in 1976, escaped from a Venezuelan jail and ended up handling logistics for Oliver North's Nicaraguan contra supply network in 1986.

"The mainstream media's treatment of this disclosure was extremely muted," Herman continued. "I believe that if Carlos had turned up as a literal employee of Bulgaria or the Soviet Union in some military-terrorist function, the media would have expressed outrage, and would have cited this as definitive evidence of a Soviet terror network.... But as [Posada] was our terrorist, the media were virtually silent."

McChesney's book, published in 1999, focuses on the economics of modern journalism and the concentration of both money and power in the hands of a few media conglomerates.

His argument is that the big media has, in many ways, become the power structure and is positioned to exploit its enormous influence to advance both its own agenda and those of its government-business allies.

"Media fare is ever more closely linked to the needs and concerns of a handful of enormous and powerful corporations, with annual revenues approaching the GDP of a small nation," McChesney argues.

McChesney also found little to cheer about at the prospect of the Internet significantly broadening the parameters of political debate. “Despite its much-ballyhooed 'openness,' to the extent that it becomes a viable mass medium, it will likely be dominated by the usual corporate suspects,” McChesney wrote.

“Certainly a few new commercial content players will emerge, but the evidence suggests that the content of the digital communication world will appear quite similar to the content of the pre-digital commercial media world.”

The announcement of the AOL-Time Warner merger on Jan. 10 only underscored McChesney' observations. On the broader issue of democracy, McChesney sees the news media dumbing down, rather than informing, the public debate.

“In many respects, we now live in a society that is only formally democratic, as the great mass of citizens has minimal say on the major public issues of the day, and such issues are scarcely debated at all in any meaningful sense in the electoral arena,” McChesney wrote.

“In our society, corporations and the wealthy enjoy a power every bit as immense as that assumed to have been enjoyed by the lords and royalty of feudal times.”

In the old Middle Ages, the process was more straightforward. The serfs were kept illiterate and the secrets were kept by a small circle of courtiers. Today, the methods must be more subtle. Real information must be degraded by mixing in propaganda and disinformation; so many people have no idea who to trust and what to believe. Today, however, a debate is overdue: whether the public should -and can -- demand a new commitment to openness not just by the government, but the commercial media as well.

So, McChesney, like Kaplan, sees the parallels between the feudalism of the old Middle Ages and this new age of “high-tech feudalism.” If that analysis turns out to be correct, then tomorrow's relationship between the rulers and the ruled will have been driven, in large part, by limitations that the modern media has placed on the knowledge of the common people.

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