

An imitation of freedom

The media in Pakistan is free only so long as it toes the government line, says **Shibil Siddiqi**

On May 22, 2011, the Mehran naval station in Karachi was attacked. The armed assailants held portions of the base for nearly 17 hours before being repelled by naval commandos. Four attackers were killed. The navy lost 10 people, along with a helicopter and two sophisticated P-3C Orion aircraft. It was the latest in a string of embarrassments for Pakistan's politically powerful military.

Four days later the South Asia bureau chief for *Asia Times Online*, Syed Saleem Shahzad, wrote that the attack on Mehran was in retaliation for an internal crackdown on al-Qaeda cells within the Pakistan Navy. Shahzad claimed that the Mehran attack had been orchestrated by Ilyas Kashmiri, the Pakistani commander of al-Qaeda's elite Brigade 313, after secret negotiations between al-Qaeda and the Navy broke down. On May 29, Shahzad went missing in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. On May 31, his body was recovered, bearing signs of torture.

Shahzad's killing underscores the need to better understand the context of media freedom in Pakistan. Huma Yusuf, an award-winning Pakistani journalist and the Pakistan Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington DC, says Pakistan's rulers have only ever allowed increased media freedom for strategic reasons.

On the cusp of the 21st century, Pakistani leaders realised the futility of restricting the flow of information over satellite signals and the internet. A tide of Indian news and programming was shaping popular regional perceptions in a way deemed detrimental to Pakistani interests – especially, says Yusuf, after the Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan in 1999.

With only two tightly controlled state-run television channels and one private channel at the time, the Pakistani government could not mount an effective resistance to Indian satellite programming. So it set about expanding Pakistan's media industry as a way of providing an alternative narrative.

Today, Pakistan has about 90 television channels (including nearly 30 news channels), more than 135 FM radio stations and almost 1500 newspapers.

As far as the military establishment is concerned, "media propaganda" is a tool to manage Pakistani opinion rather than inform it. Pakistani media is free only if it largely adheres to this strategic vision as a mouthpiece for the establishment, or at least is innocuous and subservient.

The military keeps a close eye on the national and regional media. An expanded wing within Inter Services Public Relations (the official military PR agency) closely monitors news reports. Pakistan's premier military intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), operates a clandestine "Media Management Wing".

According to Yusuf, the tools of media control have become subtle and savvy. Providing journalists with access to sources and breaking stories has partially displaced more brutal methods.

Kamran Bokhari, an intelligence and Middle East/South Asia expert with STRATFOR (Strategic Forecasting, Inc.) says: "The most common and effective media management tool is simply controlling sources of information, and restricting access to conflict areas." There are vast zones in Pakistan's insurgency stricken Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the province of Baluchistan where the press and free movement are restricted.

"More investigative minded journalists can be recruited," Bokhari continues. "Exclusive access to the highest level sources is provided in return for good relations, ensuring these journalists do not cross any red lines that could jeopardise their access."

When the media loses the script, other tactics are used. The first is financial incentives. There have been revelations that, in 2007, the Ministry of Information operated a Rs. 570 million slush fund to bribe journalists and place fake news stories. The recent "Indian WikiLeaks" story shows this approach remains pervasive.

Recalcitrant journalists can be subject to violence. In 2007, a 14-year-old boy was beaten and put into hospital when his journalist father fingered intelligence agencies in detaining and manhandling the chief justice of Pakistan.

For some journalists, the consequences are fatal. In 2005, Hayatullah Khan broke the story about American drone strikes in Pakistan. He went missing shortly after; a few months later his body was found, handcuffed and bullet-riddled.



An outcry by Pakistan's journalists and legal fraternity, here protesting in Islamabad, has forced a proper inquiry into Shahzad's murder. PHOTO: Tanveer Shahzad, DAWN Media Group

In 2007 the Ministry of Information operated a Rs. 570 million slush fund for the purpose of bribing journalists and placing fake news stories

The ISI has stared down accusations that it is connected to Shahzad's murder, issuing an unprecedented – and vaguely threatening – denial, and stating that the media "should refrain from [making] baseless allegations against the ISI that seek to deliberately malign the organisation in the eyes of the people of Pakistan".

Bokhari points out that had the ISI wished to extract information on Shahzad's sources, it could have done so without killing him. He doesn't discount the possibility that "certain officials or even rogue agents deep within the ISI's dispersed network may have acted on their own initiative and for their own reasons". The ISI has no shortage of enemies among Pakistan's insurgent groups. And Shahzad certainly had contacts not just in Pakistani intelligence but in al-Qaeda as well.

But there is another, more symbolic interpretation of Shahzad's death. Anti-establishment sentiment in Pakistan has been rising since the American raid on May 1 that killed Osama bin Laden. The brutality of Shahzad's killing could be, according to Yusuf, "a warning to the journalistic community that it is on a leash, even if it doesn't always know how long the leash is."

There are oddities in the case that could point to some state involvement. The network log for the final 18 days of Shahzad's cellular phone has been mysteriously erased. Something similar happened to the network log of journalist Umar Cheema's phone when he was kidnapped and tortured in September 2010. Cheema subsequently claimed that he had been threatened by the ISI, and publicly blamed the agency for his abduction.

Another coincidence is that Ilyas Kashmiri, whom Shahzad claimed was behind the Mehran naval station attack, was reported killed in an air strike on June 3.

In Pakistan, speaking truth to power is a dangerous exercise. According to Reporters Without Borders, Pakistan is the most dangerous place in the world to be a journalist – even more than all-out war-zones.

Shahzad's life was not inherently more precious than the dozens of other journalists in Pakistan who are killed or tortured each year. But his courage and death can become a symbol of resistance to an establishment that purports to hold a monopoly over truth and the "national interest".

Shibil Siddiqi is a journalist and a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Global Power and Politics at Trent University in Canada; www.shibil.com