

Tuesday, January 19, 2010

## COMMENT: From information 'warfare' to 'welfare' —Qamar Zaman Kaira



*Pakistan is now a functioning democracy confronted by the vestiges of information warfare, which indoctrinated our youth who have become today's suicide bombers*

Today the democratically elected government of Pakistan is tackling the challenge of ensuring freedom of expression and providing access to information to all segments of society. It is doing so in a media environment that is dangerously exposed to the deadly message and tactics of violent extremists who are threatening the peace and very existence of our country.

As the Federal Information Minister, I hear frequent use of the term 'information warfare' as a strategy to counter both extremist messages and hostile posturing from other states. However, my contention is that this term actually carries exclusivist, militarist, and clandestine connotations, which have their origins in the Second World War and the Cold War, when Western nation-states adopted it as a tool to achieve their war objectives.

Information warfare's popular synonym, 'propaganda', has little room for credibility, authenticity and appeal in modern democratic societies. History shows that propaganda is often short-lived and sometimes counter-productive. It was an effective tool at a time when information technology had not attained the scope and level of sophistication it has reached today. Therefore, 'information warfare' needs to be revisited.

The credibility, receptivity and acceptance of any information determine the success or failure of a government's outreach strategy. We have several examples where governments tried to use (selective) information to influence, mould and win public opinion in favour of their strategic objectives. During the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, for instance, we saw the absolute tailoring of information warfare and indoctrination of the ideology of jihad, the horrifying effects of which we see today in the form of extremist terror.

By choosing information warfare during the Afghan jihad, the involved actors, in fact, produced their own gravediggers. Short-term gains were made at the expense of long-term ones for governments, societies and peoples, which resulted in a huge loss of credibility and legitimacy.

The end result of following this paradigm is that the weapon of words has been replaced by the word, 'weapon'. In information warfare, truth and objectivity are the first casualties — the very approach of our enemies. Such stereotypical media connotations need to be reviewed, particularly when media is no longer controlled and it has tremendous power.

We need to de-hyphenate information from warfare, and link information with empowerment and argument. We need a paradigm shift from indoctrination to providing information and education — a shift from 'information warfare' to 'information welfare'.

For this, we must first come up with alternative idioms and mediums. A new paradigm should be based on ideas of access to information, ideological argumentation, policy articulation, public diplomacy, and strategic communications. If we want our outreach and engagement to be seen credibly and to be accepted, we must start from a point of creative engagement in which truth and objectivity are placed at the centre.

Pakistan is now a functioning democracy confronted by the vestiges of information warfare, which indoctrinated our youth who have become today's suicide bombers, whereas, our goal is to put information to the service of people's empowerment, welfare, and prosperity.

We are confronted with a war of ideas — tolerance vs. extremism, democracy vs. authoritarianism, rule of law vs. anarchy, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity and exclusivity vs. multiplicity. In this war, Pakistan's vulnerable population segments are exposed to the message of terrorists, becoming fodder for their sinister recruiting techniques.

As we confront this menace, will the strategy of information warfare — as we have known it in the past — be able to neutralise, or de-indoctrinate suicidal mindsets breeding in our society today?

Suicidal mindsets are driven by ideology and not by mere information packaging. Hence, ideology has to be defeated by ideology. Instead of information warfare, we need democratic, argumentative and critical discourses, which are firmly located in the socio-economic, cultural and political issues of Pakistan, guided by our heritage of ideologies of peace, pluralism, and co-existence.

Who is our real enemy? Our enemy is extremist ideology. How do we dismantle it? By discrediting it and providing alternatives for our audiences. What are our alternatives? They are democratic dialogue, access to information, freedom of expression and opportunity of peaceful political representation.

Let me clarify that unless Pakistan achieves these critical internal goals, it will remain vulnerable to external threats. Particularly, when we now see our

external foes exploiting Pakistan's domestic problems in their propagandist strategies. In this era of a cross-border and highly synergised media and communications landscape, we cannot rigidly dichotomise between internal and external information and communications strategies.

Will information warfare rid Pakistan of violence and replace it with a culture of peace; or will information welfare deliver public interest and protect national security by creating an internally strong fortress called Pakistan?

This is not mere rhetoric. The democratic government has been working to put in place this conceptual alternative to reach our audiences by creating a political and societal ownership of counter-extremism and counter-terrorism. With the onset of military action in Swat and Malakand last year, we launched a range of initiatives that included: daily media briefings, establishment of Crisis Communications Centres, live PTV transmissions for IDPs, large TV screens in IDP camps, an official website, a public service message campaign across nearly 50 TV channels, 30 radio stations and 200 national and regional publications, field engagement of university students, trade unions, bar councils and intellectuals, etc, to raise awareness and garner societal support for our national cause.

We learned through our experiences that information welfare works where information warfare does not. Had we followed the archaic model of information warfare, we would not have achieved the level of popular support and societal ownership for our decisive action against terrorists. After all, Pakistan has been fighting terror since 2001, but amazingly it was only in 2009 that we saw a change in social response and popular sentiments for our struggle against militancy.

It was the democratic government's initiative to launch an informed discourse on the war on terror that turned the tables in Swat and the post-Swat scenario. By articulating and arguing an alternative political and ideological discourse, our initiative served as non-military reinforcement to our valiant soldiers and commanders to boost their morale with popular support for more decisive action.

We endeavoured to be creative, innovative and credible to win the battle for hearts and minds and, more importantly, to reverse the ideology of death with the ideology of life and liberty.

What should be our way forward? A shift from indoctrination to enlightenment through a government-media partnership. Theorists have agreed upon the point that indoctrination limits the human mind and imagination, while enlightenment liberates human thinking. The democratic government believes in creating an atmosphere of opportunities for enlightenment rather than getting trapped in the mess of indoctrination and counter-indoctrination.

We believe that the cancerous disconnect of social enlightenment needs to be plugged urgently. In this struggle, the government and media have a very important role to play as partners. Like Pakistan's nascent democracy moving towards maturity, Pakistan's mushrooming media is also journeying towards maturity.

To facilitate the growth and development of the media, the democratic government has taken some important steps, which include: repealing PEMRA amendments, facilitation of a self-regulatory code of conduct, Public Media Resource Bank, Council of Complaints, Press Council, draft Freedom of Information Act and media fellowships. We also recognise that the Official Secrets Act of 1923 is a colonial hangover of information warfare, something which needs to be reviewed.

Our media policy is founded on the fundamental rights enshrined in Article 9 and Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan. Article 19 underlines the importance of freedom within the parameters of statehood, pre-empting any anarchist tendencies in the name of freedom of the press.

Pakistan's democratic government is committed to promote freedom of expression and access to information in the greater public interest. But democracy, like communication, is a two-way street. To deliver on its promise, the democratic government needs the support of an informed citizenry that can not only identify problems but can also offer solutions for good governance. Our efforts must become collaborative.

*The writer is Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting. This article is based on excerpts from a speech he recently delivered at the National Defence University, Islamabad*