

Role of Media in Shaping Political Perception in Pakistan

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Abstract

The Media has been emerging as one of the most important component of the state for the past few decades; our society witness great advancement and evolution in this globalized and technology poised era. Although the power of different tools of media like pen and radio was not to be underestimated, yet the advent of electronic and now social media has increased the role of the media manifold.

The sampling methods used are simple random sampling. A questionnaire was developed to collect primary data to observe the public perception. Data from previous researches conducted on this topic has been used for comparison and confirmation of the data collected, official surveys and quantitative data from official records have also been studied as literature review.

In this research we have attempted to gauge the role of the electronic media in the Pakistani society. We have specifically tried to find out the extent to

which the electronic media has the power to mold the political opinion of the public. The masses have the right to shift the balance of power from one political side to another; this paper examines how much power the media manipulate and influence on the political beliefs of the masses.

Keywords: Power of Electronic Media, Influence of Electronic Media, Public Opinion and Media

Introduction

“Electronic media uses media such as television, radio, and internet enabled computers made possible by technology. Electronic media plays a crucial role promoting communication in the society through various ways.

- First, electronic media contributes to the advancement of the business environment.
- Secondly, electronic media promotes marketing for business by employing as tools for communication.
- Thirdly, electronic media facilitates interactive communication.
- Fourthly, electronic media such as television and radio enable individuals to get news and information concerning the whole world” (Importance of Electronic Media, 2016).

As the electronic media plays an important role in informing the masses about what happens in the world around them, it is particularly relevant in those areas in which audiences do not have access to direct knowledge or experience. When we talk about Pakistan, now against the statistics now almost every household has a television set or have an access to it; television is the main source of entertainment and news for a majority of the households. This study does not assert that the media tells the people 'what to think', mostly people do not absorb media messages uncritically, however, “the media and especially the electronic media are key to setting of agendas and focusing public interest on certain subjects, which operates to limit the range of arguments and perspectives that are the basis of public debate. Hence, drawing on a multidimensional model of communications process” (Catherine & Philo, 2013), this study examines the role of the electronic media in the construction of public belief regarding politics in Pakistan.

“In terms of shaping content, we argue that a number of privileged groups contribute to the production of media accounts, including social and political institutions and other interest groups such as lobbyists and public relations industry. News may appear sometimes “as a chaotic flow of information and debate but it is

also underpinned by key assumptions about social relationships and how they are to be understood. At the heart of these are beliefs about motivations, cause and effect, responsibility and consequence” (Catherine & Philo, 2013). In other words, citizens learn about politics and government primarily from television and newspapers, media can influence voters not only through a slant of a particular report, also merely by choosing which stories to cover.

To view the flip side of this matter, we have to understand that “politics is a very sensitive issue which demands that politicians maintain a close contact with masses through messages that can persuade the electorate to get associated with them. Similarly, it proves harder for the governments and other political institutions to release information to the public without the help of the media. Thus, electronic media plays a very important role in enhancing transmission of information across political class as well as from the political class to the masses” (Dozier, 2014).

Review of literature

In order to understand the role of media in shaping political opinions in Pakistan, we first need to understand the fact that media does have an impact on the human mind.

“The media – television, the press and online – play a central role in communicating to the public what happens in the world. In those cases in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience of what is happening, they become particularly reliant upon the media to inform them. That is not to say that the media simply tell us what to think – people do not absorb media messages uncritically” (Philo, 2008; Philo, Miller, & Happer, in press). But they are key to the setting of agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects, which operates to limit the range of arguments and perspectives that inform public debate. “Drawing on a multi-dimensional model of the communications process, this article examines the role of the media in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change” (Catherine & Philo, 2013).

According to the World Bank collection of development indicators, "in 2006, 55.7% of households in Pakistan were reported to have television sets from whom just 18% of Pakistanis follow current news and political events about the country a lot, and almost half 47.07% follow current events to somewhat. About one-third of the respondents i.e. 29.6% found current affairs program being less attentive and following current events very little and 4.6% respond they are not at all interested in currents affairs program. Results trend upward with educational level; 30% of those with an intermediate education or more say they follow current events allot. Overall, 32.2% of Pakistani adults report discussing or sharing news with family or friends weekly or more. While 22.5% say they never do so" (World Development Indicators 2006, 2006).

"Television is the dominant media platform in Pakistan, with more than 3/4th adults (76.5%) viewership. These figures are higher in urban areas i.e. 89.3%" (Contemporary Media Use in Pakistan, 2014). After 2002, the government of Musharrafs regime liberalized the county's broadcast sector and since then there has been a constant influx of news and other forms of channels in the industry. There has been much debate regarding the impact of media in shaping opinions, different schools of thought have differing views about the ownership of the media, the role of the State and political processes, the content of the media particularly news production and the representation of different groups in the mass media. One perspective suggests that "the audiences wield more power than the media, it is the public opinion which is generally reflected by the media, according to them Consumer sovereignty is evident from newspapers that have closed because of low circulation, television series that have been abandoned because of poor ratings, or radio programmes that have been sustained through public support" (Akdenizli & Kaplan, 2016). However, this perspective overlooks the role of the State in regulating what is said and how it is said. Broadcasting by TV or any other medium requires a government license, the distribution of which is obviously controlled. Many commentators also argue

that it is actually the advertising revenue that determines the overall structure and content of the electronic media.

On the other hand, the socialist or Marxist perspective believes that the media is a tool of the ruling class to consciously manipulate and control the minds of the masses; the hypnotic power of the media deprives the masses of the capacity for critical thought. This perspective says that the content of the media is as much determined by the owners and advertisers as it is by the consumers.

However, this school of thought views the media in isolation from society, and as part of its ideological superstructure and the attribution of unlimited power to the media is also unrepresentative.

Talking about the impact of media in the political scenario of the Pakistani society, “the media has a huge impact on society and also on public opinion. They can shape public opinion in different ways depending on what is the objective” (Lafif, 2015). This means they can portray an ordinary thing so negatively that it may force people to think or act in quite the opposite way. Politically, “Pakistan is a transitional democracy whose media system reflects many aspects of Polarized Pluralism Model. In this model, media are integrated into party politics” (Rizvi, 2012). Pakistani political parties are highly polarized and have embedded media logic in their decision-making Individual media organizations are allied with one of the respective camp a structure known as parallelism. Previous research has shown that media parallelism can increase the polarization of the media-political environment, particularly close to the elections.

Some research points indicate that such might not be the case in general and that the media is not the sole or major influence that shapes political opinion in countries, yet for Pakistan as can be observed, this institution has at least some power to mold public perception.

So we can say that, “the advent of media has shown that the world is made up of a mass of circulating, disjointed, and often

contradictory information. An effective flow of information between the various distinct groups in the public sphere has historically been made possible by the mass media, which systematically edit and interpret the mass of information, making some sense of the world for audiences. As certain knowledges have been promoted over others, they have effectively been given the privileged status of being authoritative and, in some cases, truthful” (Fairclough, 2003; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Van Dijk, 1998).

“In terms of shaping content, we argue that a number of privileged groups contribute to the production of media accounts, including social and political institutions and other interest groups such as lobbyists and the public relations industry” (Miller & Dinan, 2000, 2009). The key point is therefore that all of the elements involved in the media communications circuit are influential.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to gauge whether the electronic media in Pakistan has any role in shaping the political opinion of the masses which results in shift of power.

Research Hypothesis

HA= The electronic media plays a major role in shaping political perception of the people.

Ho= The electronic media does not play a major role in shaping political perception of the people.

Research Methodology

Alongside reviewing existing data and official figures, a close ended questionnaire has been prepared and distributed among students of University of Karachi.

Research Questionnaires distributed	400
Research Questionnaires discarded	30
Valid Responses	370

Variables

There are two main variables in this piece of research. One variable is the *electronic media and its influence*, the other variable is the *political perception of the masses*.

As seen in the hypothesis, the electronic media is the independent variable which either does or does not shape public perception. Whereas, the political perception of the masses is the dependent variable and it is either affected or not affected by the electronic media.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Following is the summary of the research finding collected via questionnaire.

Statement	Responses		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Actively follow current affairs via news channels.	45.3%	54.7%	--
Spend more than 3 hours in a day watching news channels and political talk shows	10.1%	85.7%	4.2%
Portrayal of political parties on the electronic media is accurate.	54.7%	12.11%	33.19%
The media is an independent institution and not politically aligned.	28.42%	33.6%	37.98%

Respondents who voted in 2013 elections	64%
Respondents who did not vote in 2013 elections	36%

The data collected from the respondents does not indicate to the fact that media exercises a control over the minds of the public. Less than half of the people said they follow current affairs on TV while a majority of the people denied watching political programs on TV. On the other hand, almost 2/3rd of the respondents said that they voted in the general elections of 2013. The voting trend among the respondents shows that they follow certain political ideologies, yet, more than half of them don't follow current news on TV, thus, seemingly their political beliefs cannot be attributed to the influence of the messages conveyed by the media.

However, almost 1/3rd of the respondents agreed that different media houses are politically aligned to different parties and committed to defending their interests. Moreover, almost half of those respondents who follow current affairs via TV said that the parties they follow are accurately represented by the media, this can be taken as an indication that there is certainly a two-way process between the media and the masses which determines the perception regarding political parties.

The existing literature and analysis regarding the hypnotic powers of the media say otherwise. 'Televised reporting of politics has been almost completely transformed elections are largely fought on television, sittings of houses of Parliament are broadcasted daily, and politicians are interviewed by reporters and the public'

There are several models devised by sociologists and researchers that explain the effects of the media on the minds of the masses, the hypodermic syringe model for instance says that "the media has the power to inject its message into the audience with the force of a hypodermic syringe"

Hence, the expansion of the media has generated such questions which even today don't have definite answers. The data collected does not support the alternate hypothesis but the existing literature and general observation of social trends suggest otherwise.

Conclusion

The influence of electronic media has been seen to affect the opinion of the masses and political parties have been known to use the media as a tool to build their own image and demolish the credibility of their opponents. Contrastingly, this report does not cover the factors or those forces that make the media a relevant tool to shape the perception of the masses, neither does it examine in detail the reverse effect of the public perception on the policies of the media, this study focuses on the role played by the mass media in constructing and destroying public opinion with regard to political scenarios in Pakistan, the purpose of this study was to evaluate whether the electronic media has the power to change the opinion of the masses and to provide some recommendations in the course of this discussion.

Recommendations

In countries such as Pakistan TV is main source of information for the general public, while the media channels are known to manipulate and portray news in a manner to send out specific messages, viewers are also known to particularly follow those news channels that are aligned with their favorite political party.

One solution would be for the viewers to watch programs and hannels that convey opposite political narratives at least once a week, so that their own polarized perception can be somewhat neutralized.

The governments should take steps to regulate media policies without undermining the independence of the media, if the media is truly free and does not follow parallelism, they will not convey polarized messages to the public.

The media channels and journalists should make it a part of their policy and education to empower the audiences instead of njecting particular narratives into the audience. A pluralist setup should ensure competition and authenticity.

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