Perception of Electronic News Media of Pakistan in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The news and views of Pakistani television channels are extensively shared on digital media for information or analysis where the general public discusses overt and covert agendas by mentioning their factual and presentational style.   This study contributes to the contemporary studies of media perception through focus group interviews with 72 randomly selected master's and bachelor's students studying Media and Communication at the School of Media and Communication Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan to provide information about the feelings and observations of future journalists and media literates. In summary, the findings of our research exposed the negative perception of Pakistani electronic media among the participants due to what they perceived as biased, inaccurate, and unethical reporting.

Keywords: journalism, electronic media, news channels, media perception, Pakistani media

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Pakistani media institutions and journalists are generally considered dishonest due to the perception of being biased and being under the influence of corrupt political leaders. This negative perception has established the notion of media incredibility and distrust among the masses (Manuel, 2013). Even the present prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, has accused media persons of hiding the corruption of former governments through their planted programs and stated that "people have lost interest in meaningless current affairs shows" (Shabbir, 2020, para. 2). With the advent of digitalization, the assumptions and accusations that the mainstream media are biased have been a subject of considerable debate regarding the credibility of Pakistani media, and this study is set to investigate this issue among the new generation of media persons. It is noted that famous Pakistani media outlets compromise their journalistic values daily by using their standards, and the age of digitalization is strengthening the perception among the masses that journalists are not performing their ethical duties and responsibilities properly (Ali, 2021). Nowadays, the primary objective of Pakistani media houses has changed towards profit-making instead of spreading the truth without any pressure. The race to cover breaking news has replaced the practice of news verification and source validation (Ali, 2021).

"Meanwhile, professionals who believe in credibility, objectivity, and honesty as essential parts of ethical journalism are becoming side-lined" (Abbas, 2012, para. 1). The corruption of journalists, particularly reporters and photographers, is very common as well. They often receive envelopes from politicians, government officials, and political activists (Ahmad, 2011), and are involved in twisting the facts and figures with the intent of deception for their vested interests (Sumbal, 2011). In this new age, when the Internet has become a dynamic source of information, media credibility has gained great attention from the masses and critics (Wathen & Burkell, 2002) particularly due to the diffusion of electronic media in digital media (Garrison, 2003). No doubt, Pakistani news channels emerged in this new millennium as an appealing source of information and analytical debates and obtained people's confidence. However, the digital age has raised many queries, and the main question is the accessibility of credibility of electronic news media.

In Pakistan, where the tertiary Gross Enrollment Ratio is very low, 9% in 2018 (Hunter, 2020), today's university students will play a critical role as opinion leaders and the future leaders of Pakistani society. Among these students, those studying

media are likely to have more nuanced and detailed opinions about the current state of journalism in Pakistan. Understanding the opinions of these media students is an important step in understanding media credibility in Pakistan. This study has attempted to delineate the perception of media learners regarding the credibility of news channels in the contemporary era, which will contribute to academic and industrial future perspectives.

Literature Review

The impact of communication and the free flow of information has moved the world into "a borderless town," a real concept of Marshal McLuhan, and in the recent scenario, civilization could not grow without organized structured communication and knowledge (Hungbo, 2007). No doubt, the news media is a vibrant source of obtaining world information and it has an impressive role in shaping public opinion and in changing the minds of people and their narratives. However, people have also analyzed the sources and made an opinion about media organizations and platforms. Their views about media are based on the analysis and investigation of the topics covered by news media, which form positive or negative perceptions (Bracken, 2006; Choi et al., 2006). The quick flow of information and easy access to huge information repositories and many opportunities for social interaction in this digital age has drastically altered the behavior of people toward media content. The practice of affirming the credibility of news channels' content has become highly consequential among political and social groups and individuals in the contemporary world because of its profound influence on our social and political spheres (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008).

Social scientists around the world investigate the issues and phenomena regarding public perception and people's interests in news media. A scholarly discourse has emerged in recent years to analyze the factors responsible for the uncertainty of public confidence in the news media. News media is considered to be manipulating the public views with its conservative biased reporting and with an uninterrupted stream of standardized opinion and an unchecked flow of news and sensationalism gathered from every corner of the world. News media are influencing

public opinions by disseminating basic and shallow knowledge and are creating a huge number of uniformed individuals, often armed with irrationality and biases (Quackenbush, 2013). The elements involved to shape public opinion are expressive of the political inclinations and "game framing, in which political issues are treated as strategic contests" rather than any clear intentions of professional responsibility by the journalists (McLeod et al., 2017, p. 41). This could lead to increased perceptions of media bias (Willnat et al., 2019).

The journalistic values, which are linked with ethical values and principles of journalism like credibility, truthfulness, neutrality, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, un-biasness, and factuality provide a desired way for journalists to examine the problems and issues of the society (Maras, 2013; Schudson, 2001). While writing stories, journalists should not add their political, social, or cultural affiliations and should keep their personal attitudes away from the news stories, because journalistic biases can be identified by reading the news content of the journalists (Hackett, 2009), which create negative perceptions of the news media in the society. Moreover, user-generated comments on online news websites provide prompt analysis and affect the reader's interpretations and their perception of media credibility (Lee, 2012).

"The credibility of traditional journalism stems from the established experience of highly skilled correspondents and editors as well as from the depth of news coverage offered through analysis, discussion and comment on the events" (El Semary & Al Khaja, 2013, p. 60). Credibility research has two basic components, reporting accuracy and believability of source. Reporting was measured through the judgement of journalists' expertise, competence, honesty, openness, and caring attitude. In this regard, research work was done with a special focus on message comprehensibility, completeness, and fairness of the news story, and consistency of the opinion. These qualities create source credibility as previous work has indicated that the audience believes in journalists' ability to dig out the truth and its fair analytical presentation. The journalists exhibiting a rational point of view are considered a reliable source, and people believe in their political evaluation and criticism of the government. However, people analyze and scrutinize message content, and it is evident that accurate reporting and well-founded communication affects perceptions of believability and credibility assessments (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Metzger et al., 2003).

The traditional media (i.e., print and electronic media), which is considered the backbone of a society (Panday, 2009), can play a profound role in this regard with its objectivity: provision of factual information and expert opinion regarding the issues and events. Scholars have also analyzed the different approaches to probe objectivity in news media like validity and trust in media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2012; Bracken, 2006; Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006), and it is found that citizens in a democratic society believe that media is the only platform that can raise their voices at the local as well as the national level and get their issues resolved (Hackett & Zhao, 1996).

However, journalists' political associations, cultural affiliations, and partisanship reflect in their report writings and critical analysis. They don't embrace standards of journalism, portray the news stories according to their frame of reference, and analyze the issues with their values and sentiments. Certain questions were investigated by the scholars, like: Do journalists remain objective when writing news stories? What practices does a journalist follow in reporting facts? It is found that journalists promote sensationalism instead of writing and promoting the facts of a story (Quackenbush, 2013). Their associations and affiliations depict in the content and analysis while writing a news story, and they do not avoid portraying the unverified stories and biased interpretation (Keller, 2013).

Methodology

This research used focus group discussions as a discovery tool to analyze the perception of news channels of Pakistan in terms of credibility and objectivity, because focus groups can provide information about the number of ideas and feelings about current issues as well as highlight the differences between the groups and individuals' perspectives (Green, 2007). The study's protocols focused on trustworthiness, fairness, accuracy, and confidence in reporting and current affairs' programs. Five questions about fairness, bias, and competency were asked, which we further discussed in the results. The researchers selected groups of students from different degree programs in Media and Communication from the School of Media and Communication Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. This school has more than 700 students enrolled in BS, MA, and M.Phil. programs. The eight

groups of male and female students (n=72) were selected using simple random sampling from three different degree programs, two from M.Phil. (n1=8; n2=9), two from MA (n3=8; n4=9), and four groups from BS (n5=10; n6=9; n7=8; n8=10), based on the number of students in each of these programs. To conduct this research effectively and to get reliable and valid results, a moderator was trained by the researchers. Both male and female participants were encouraged to respond and share their thoughts and views regarding Pakistani news channels. The interviews were conducted in Urdu, and the summary was translated into English.

Results

This focus group study used the values of journalism, fairness, factuality, expertise, and integrity to measure the perception of electronic news media among respondents. All the opinions and statements in this section are summaries of or quotes from one or more of the focus group discussions.

When asked their perception of "Is Pakistani electronic media fair?", most of the respondents from all groups mentioned unfairness and imbalance in the news stories, particularly about political news. Students expressed that on national issues, journalists may seem to discuss the problems of the country on their talk shows, but it has no productive outcome because they mostly discuss the issues with incompetent politicians, who create the problems, instead of interviewing experts and professionals. Their programs are similar to the political entertainment shows where guests, mostly politicians, insult opponents; even some anchors add fuel to the fire to attain scandalous fame. One student added that "the electronic media in Pakistan is very popular among the masses and it has an immense influence, but the distortion of social reality is visible in their programs due to their inclination towards a specific political party while fairness demands no favoritism and no discrimination." Students believed that journalists twist the facts and information based on their agenda, and it seems clear that some media channels are broadcasting their news, particularly current affairs programs, for the government or for the opposition and portray an absurd image of the media to the nation. People have started believing them to be either fake news providers or incredible sources of information due to their favoritism.

A follow-up question, "Is Pakistani news media biased?" was then asked. Several respondents said that news channels are politically and ideologically biased. They said that you can see clear inequality in coverage, time, and opportunity provided to the representatives of different political parties on controversial issues. An incompetent and improper representative is selected against the person of the favorite party. Further, use of language in news reporting and concluding remarks of current affairs programs show their biases. Anchors criticize the manifesto and practices of opposition parties and try to manipulate the news, either political or non-political, in terms of political and administrative points of view without a fair investigation. They support the ideology and point of view of their allied party or parties and criticize opponents most of the time for no reason.

Further, the interviewer asked the respondents, "Are media persons well-trained?" Most of the respondents from each group stated that reporters are not trained in their beats, while anchors and hosts of current affairs programs report and analyze every issue irrespective of their command and expertise. Even the analyses done by the leading journalists are badly missing the right direction and journalistic standards and objectives. In particular, when these journalists discuss or report the issues of international concern, they cannot understand the national interests and the relations with allies and other nations. Further, respondents expressed that we have a terrible image of Pakistani media, and it is because of the way media outlets are projecting Pakistan in the world. They always portray the country as an insecure place and present the image that Pakistan is always at war and nothing is stable here. Media persons criticize security departments like the police and the Federal Investigation Agency often on their failure but never appreciate and highlight inspiring narratives of success and sacrifices. They cannot produce good content for their channels; so, they frequently depend on burning issues and hot agendas to fill the time. A female respondent from the MA Media and Communication program said, "Pakistani electronic media has badly failed for the national objective, cohesion, and integration, and I could not find even a determination of long-term perspectives."

Responding to the question, "Is Pakistani electronic media working for community well-being and for public interest?", most students said that if we analyze the history of journalism, we find it to be a profession whose main purpose was to

inform people about socio-political issues and current affairs with objectivity. However, the students found that, as they have grown in this new millennium, news channels have introduced competition among themselves, and it has become a business and source of profit-making rather than the source of trusted news and productive debates. The issues of community well-being, like education, employment, basic human rights, etc., are not covered as needed for the betterment of the society, according to the students. Students believed they are providing sensationalized and exaggerated news, with a negative outlook and thatnews channels in Pakistan are in a rating competition with each other and they do not bother about the ethics and values of journalism to gain profits and ratings. Students assumed channels broadcast the news without complete information and proper verification, and this breaking news culture is damaging the values of journalism. Moreover, they disseminate opinionated information regarding any issue and involve celebrities and politicians to get a good rating. They manage the audience by producing scandalous political debates instead of constructive analysis of current affairs issues.

Responding to the next question, "How does Pakistani electronic media present entertainment news?" students were annoyed and concerned about their culture, particularly in contrast to the portrayal of Indian culture. They said that the media is the most powerful institution of a country influencing perception and thoughts, and the ruling class influences people's behavior by buying media houses and manipulating viewers' minds according to their goals. They added that the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) tries to streamline news media according to the state policy and ideology, but this is not an easy task. Electronic media is exercising its power without bothering with the rules and regulations of PEMRA under the slogan of freedom of expression.

A male participant from M.Phil. group expressed that "No doubt, the media in Pakistan is now enjoying more freedom of expression as compared to the previous era, which is a good sign, but it should be exercised with responsibility. It is not the license to propagate negativity about politics, personal matters, and sensitive issues."

A group comprised of M.Phil. students concluded that, if we see an overview of Pakistani news channels, we see a mix of routine and performance; news channels

inform and educate the public and raise the problems of the society in their news bulletin but they politicize the issues in their discussion programs and use framing and filter techniques to disseminate their point of view among the masses. On the other side, the aggressive style of delivering news and repetition in a slapdash way produces anxiety, tension, and fear among the audience. People working in electronic media do not think about their viewers' emotions and mental stability and start showing us the things which frighten and disturb our emotions, and this all happens just for the sake of ratings. This practice could be a threat to the country's future and for grooming the young generation. The M.Phil. students added that talk shows and discussion programs should be based on impartial analysis and they should be concluded with the logical solutions to the problem. Our media should work with objectivity and should provide news with accuracy and fairness. Media channels must pay full attention to their real duties of community betterment and mentoring instead of the manipulation of facts and figures for their vested interests, according to the M.Phil. focus group discussion.

Conclusion

This study set out to analyze the perception of media students about Pakistani electronic news media. The results support the previous research that the electronic media is losing credibility, particularly in less democratic countries, due to the news framing, biased reporting, and biased analysis (Shirikov, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Keller, 2013). Most of the respondents believe that media is compromising on factuality and fairness, and the recent surveys and research assert that media in less developed countries is less credible; however, the main reason behind this is not only the biased attitude of the journalists, but there is a polemical role of non-mainstream partisan media as well (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Soon, & How Tan, 2016). Keeping in view the social judgement theory, this study also found that discussants who are active users of social media have compared media reports and journalists' analysis with their developed perception. No doubt, the presentation style of the news anchors and the information and competence of the hosts of current affairs programs affect public perception, but the audience judges it with their prior knowledge and expertise to

make their perception. It is evident that social media critical information and ideological polarized content mostly inculcate negative perception about mainstream media (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; McLeod et al., 2017). Some students in this study concluded that the coverage of news reports is satisfactory, but regarding the current affairs programs they also said that these programs are not following the journalistic standards of objectivity. All students expect positive and constructive analysis from the media persons and believe that the media should focus on their basic tasks of human rights and social responsibilities. In light of the results, this research indicates that media literacy is enhancing concerns over news media persons and organizations, and unbiased reporting and analysis can guard their credibility.

Recommendations for Future Research

It would be beneficial for future research to analyze the content and flow of social media information that media students are exposed to in order to understand more clearly the phenomenon of news media perception and credibility among media literates of the digital world.

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