

Removal in 1999: Exploring bias in press

Taimur-ul-Hassan^{*}

Abstract

Press plays an important role in promoting democracy. Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy in which political parties are central to the system but, because of the repeated interventions in the system, the press had to work under pressure in our country. The last removal of a political government took place on 12 October 1999. This article aims to find through content analysis how the national newspapers covered the removal of the government, and whether there was pro 12/10/1999 action bias in the newspapers in the form of giving more stories related to corruption and bad governance of the deposed government and less stories related to criticism of the action and calls for democracy, and using their own sources and special cells for news stories. Political economy of media, agenda setting, framing and news bias constitute the theoretical framework for this article. The findings show that the newspapers did not adopt a pro-action bias in their coverage of 12/10/1999.

Background

On 12 October 1999, the then army chief removed the political government on the plea that its head tried to illegally remove him from his office. The removal was followed by allegations of corruption and wrongdoing against the deposed government and its head. The dismissal of the government weakened parliamentary democracy in the country. In Pakistan, there is a perception that the establishment, comprising army and civil bureaucracy, holds invisible power. Working under various pressures and influences, the press has largely found it difficult to adopt an anti-establishment line. How Pakistani newspapers reacted to this event will be analyzed within a time horizon of three months from the date of the removal of government on 12 October 1999. In this context, the role of the press in democracy needs to be visited. It is established that press plays a vital role in democracy. From Milton to Mill, liberal theorists have held a firm opinion that democratization of a country is

^{*} Dr. Taimur-ul-Hassan, Associate Professor of Mass Communication, Beaconhouse National University (BNU).

hinged on an independent press.¹ After the World War II, the media was used for development purposes, including induction of democratic thought in the West, which was stressed upon by mass media theorists.² The media evolved to become a public sphere for a free exchange of ideas to promote democracy.

As these thoughts evolved and with that a new value was placed on the media, the media gradually democratized society and led to the emergence of democratic values and norms.³ While it can be said that the press's role of informing, educating and forming a pro-democracy public opinion led to modern democracy, the journey has been long starting from the emergence of mass circulation newspapers in the mid 1800s.⁴ This transformation turned the press into battlegrounds for the control of society.⁵

However, the press continued to pave the ground for democracy, facing many odds in the process. It continues to do that, but it requires freedom to work independently and fearlessly, with a positive effect on democracy. Press freedom is like oxygen for a healthy democracy.⁶

The role of press in democracy is important in Pakistan, because creation of Pakistan was the result of a political and constitutional movement, which was ably aided by the Muslim press. This press played a vital role in the Pakistan Movement.⁷ After independence, the expectation was that the press would promote democracy in the country in consonance with the belief that democracy and press are inter-linked. It is possible to have a free press and a responsive, democratic government at the same time. The press in Pakistan had to work hard to have that freedom. But then the press across the world has faced the same situation of working hard to win freedom. Indeed, winning press

¹ Pippa Norris, *Good Governance, Human Development, and Mass Communication, Comparing Political Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.117.

² Jan Servas (ed.), *Communication for Development and Social Change*, Sage, 2007, pp.167-68.

³ Jean Folkerts and Stephen Lacy, *The Media in Your Life*, Pearson Education, 2009, p.32.

⁴ Shirely Biagi, *Media/Impact: An Introduction to Mass Media*, Thomson Wadsworth, 2005, p.274.

⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.35.

⁶ AN Shamsi, *Mass Media in New World Order* (New Delhi: SBS Publishers, 2006), pp.49-50.

⁷ Mehdi Hasan, *Survey of Journalism* (Lahore: Aziz Book, 2006), p.48.

freedom is attributed to its heroic struggle against the state.⁸ In Pakistan, press freedom has been won in the face of despotic regimes and in the wake of anti-press laws and actions. In many cases, the press in Pakistan has adopted a policy of appeasing the establishment and, in others, it has followed an independent policy. Against this background, this article will explore newspapers performance with regard to the removal of the government in 1999 and will try to find whether it adopted a pro-establishment bias or not. This article will build a theoretical perspective before giving a research design to find bias in their coverage.

Theoretical perspective

The agenda setting theory was developed in the 1970s. It asserts that the media in a society has certain agendas and in order to achieve those agendas it prefer some issues/personalities over the other.⁹ Earlier, it was argued that facts are now established by the media as media draws pictures in our heads of the events happening around us.¹⁰ In this context, it is not the absolute significance of an issue that counts but the related forces and people trying to promote that issue.¹¹ Agenda setting is the way an issue or other object is covered in the media and affects the way public thinks about that. The way an issue or other object is covered in the media affects the salience of that object in the public agenda. The frequency of news message determines the importance some organization is giving to it. Increase in media coverage of some issue or event by way of putting up specific stories after the selection process brings about increase in the salience of that issue or event. Media along with the government can set an agenda and shape public opinion in their favor. There is a tendency towards cutting back the amount of news opposite to the media and government interest.

Agendas of media and interests of ruling elite are linked. Critical theorist argue that media serves the dominant elite. News filters set frames. There is a direct link between economic ownership and dissemination of messages that affirm the legitimacy and the values of a

⁸ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.65.

⁹ McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, No.36 (July 1972), pp.176-87.

¹⁰ Walter Lippmann in Stanley Baran and Dennis K Davis (eds.), *Mass Communication Theory-Foundations, Ferment, and Future* (Noida, UP: Anubha Printers, revised ed., 2006), p.85.

¹¹ JW Dearing and EM Rogers, *Agenda Setting* (Michigan: Sage, 1996), p.23.

class society. Evidence is provided by the concentration of media, which is leading to imposition of a repressive system.¹² This system can eradicate voices of those who disagree with policies of the elite. The government thus in many ways affects the news coverage of media. Media adopts frames that serve the official agenda; in this way, media supports government line of thinking. The agenda setting role of media is not confined to focusing public attention on a specific aspect of an issue but also on a particular line of thinking, which makes this role more powerful in shaping or influencing public opinion.

News framing is the way through agenda setting is done. Media frames as ‘persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that furnish an interpretation of events’.¹³ Concept of framing can also be explained through the social construction of reality model that exists within media accounts of issues.¹⁴ The social narratives that are created legitimize particular interpretations of issues and events.¹⁵ Frames are patterns used to explain events and make indirect points in stories. The aim is to present an event in a particular way. Frames simplify, prioritize and structure news events and issues, and are based on the premise that it will have influence on audiences’ understating of an issue.¹⁶ Selected stories are given and aspects of an event are made salient in the coverage. Framing is continuing from the time the media established its foothold in society. Framing occurs in four phases: (i) frame building; (ii) frame setting; (iii) individual level effects of framing, and (iv) links between individual frames and media frames. Essentially, frames set the boundaries of public debates.¹⁷ It can be said that most information we get through media is framed. Framing involves selection and salience.¹⁸ Journalists select some aspects of a reality and make them more salient in the belief that it will influence the people’s opinion on an issue.

¹² Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory* (London: Sage Publishers, revised ed. 2005), pp.95-6.

¹³ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p.372.

¹⁴ Gaye Tuchman, *Making the News* (New York: Free Press, 1978), p.133.

¹⁵ Frank Durham, ‘News Frames as Social Narratives: TWA Flight 800’, *Journal of Communication*, No.48 (1998), pp.100-17.

¹⁶ Z Pan and G Kosicki, ‘Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse’, *Political Communication*, 1993, pp.59-79.

¹⁷ DA Scheufele, ‘Framing Theory of Media Effects’, *Journal of Communication*, No.49 (January 1999), pp.103-22.

¹⁸ RM Entman, ‘Framing: Towards Classification of a Fractured Paradigm’, *Journal of Communication*, No.43 (April 1993), pp.51-8.

Framing is a continuous, active process and value-laden process. News frames are implicit, and do not appear to audience as social constructions. To them, they are merely events that reporters are reflecting. Framing is a package of information prepared on the principles of selection, emphasis and presentation. Media bias is linked to this theoretical framework. It is salience given to an issue/ event by way of selecting and excluding stories with a specific agenda in mind. Bias is done by journalists and news organizations working under the influence of those wielding power. Selection of object and selection of attributes are powerful effects.¹⁹ To sum up, publication of more stories on a specific point of view or thinking or aspect of an issue determine the media bias. Selection of sources used by the media for news is another way.

Methodology

This study will draw on this theoretical perspective to make assumptions about how the removal of the government in 1999 was covered by the newspapers in Pakistan. Hypothesis is, newspapers will have pro-12/10/1999 action bias in its coverage. Sub-hypotheses are, there will be more stories on corruption and bad governance and less stories on criticism of the removal and calls for democracy; there will be less stories on personal corruption and more stories on government corruption, and there will more use of newspaper sources and less use of other sources in relation to stories on personal corruption. Pro-action is operationalized as focus on corruption and bad governance, while anti-action is focus on criticism of the removal and calls for democracy. Corruption means corruption by the deposed prime minister and his family and government corruption means corruption by his government. Sources are operationalized as sources used by the newspapers under study in regard to gathering stories on the removal of the government.

A quantitative content analysis of all newspapers with national readership for three months starting from 12 October 1999, will be done. This will serve as universe and sample. Unit of analysis will be news stories related to the removal of government. While framing can be measured through tone, direction and impression, media bias can be found through the number of stories on specific topics and also sources.

Bias will be measured through categories of pro-action and anti-action news stories published by the newspapers. Corruption will be

¹⁹ Mc Combs and Llama, 'Second Level Agenda Setting', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, No. 74 (September 1997), pp.703-07.

further categorized into personal corruption and government corruption. To know about the priority of gatekeepers in the newspapers, sources will also be explored. Sources will be categorized as newspapers sources, including reporter, special cells, investigative, and others including news agencies and press releases. To enrich the research, findings will also be qualitatively analyzed.

Findings

Topic N=724

Table 1

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Corruption / bad governance	345	47.7	47.7	47.7
Others	379	52.3	52.3	100.0
Total	724	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Corruption/ bad governance	345	362.0	-17.0
Others	379	362.0	17.0
Total	724		

Test Statistics

Table 3

	Stories
Chi-Square	1.597
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.206

Conclusion: since P-Value=0.206 greater than 0.05, so, we reject H_1 and accept H_0 .

H_1 : There will be more stories on corruption and bad governance and less stories on criticism of the removal of the government and calls for democracy.

Corruption N=345

Table 4

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Personal Corruption	140	40.6	40.6	40.6
Govt. Corruption	205	59.4	59.4	100
Total	345	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Personal Corruption	140	172.5	-32.5
Govt. Corruption	205	172.5	32.5
Total	345		

Test Statistics

Table 6

	Stories
Chi-Square	12.246
Dr	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Conclusion: since P-Value=0.000 less than 0.05. So, we accept H_1^i and reject H_0 .

H_1^i : There will be less stories on personal corruption and more stories on govt. corruption.

Sources N=140

Table 7

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Newspaper Source	69	49.3	49.3	49.3
Other Source	71	50.7	50.7	100.0
Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 8

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Newspaper Source	69	70.0	-1.0
Other Source	71	70.0	1.0
Total	140		

Table 9

	Sources
Chi-Square	.029
Df	1
Asymp. Sig	.866

Conclusion: since P-Value=0.866 greater than 0.05. so, we reject H_1^{ii} and accept H_0 .

H_1^{ii} : There will be more use of newspaper sources and less use of other sources with regard to stories on personal corruption.

Following is the qualitative analysis of some stories that appeared in the newspapers. Allegations of corruption and bad governance were leveled against the deposed government and its head by those who took action against them on 12 October 1999. Personal corruption was included in these allegations. Newspapers covered them according to their policies, some endorsing these charges. For example, a report about corruption and bad governance was filed by Abdul Sattar Khan of *The News* Investigation Cell on 14 October. The report told the readers that five key FIA cases against the removed prime minister were closed in March 1999. He did not disclose that in March. Similarly, a *Jang's* report in four columns on 14 October told the readers that the removed government was involved in corruption and bad governance. These charges were similar to those made by the new government.

After initial editorial comments, the coverage of newspapers revolved around these charges. *Business Recorder* on 14 October carried a statement calling for accountability of the removed government. *Jang* and *Khabrain* gave more stories on corruption/bad governance than other newspapers. *Jang* published a news story on 15 October, which informed the readers about the former prime minister's family loans. *Pakistan*, gave a three column story on October 15 on similar charges. Other newspapers did the same. *Dawn*, Karachi, published a double column

statement on 16 October, calling for filing a case against the removed prime minister, while a two-column statement in the *Nation* on October 16, called for his trial. The *News* (of the Jang Group of Newspapers) gave some exclusive stories by Kamran Khan, Amir Mir and its News Investigative Cell. Nasim Zehra in *The News* on 16 October described the fate of the removed government as 'A self written obituary'. *Din* carried a statement against the deposed prime minister on 17 October.

The stories on corruption/bad governance peaked in third week October. *Nation* on 19 October told readers that the former prime minister destroyed Pakistan Steels Mills to benefit Ittefaq Foundries, while *Dawn* carried a PPI story on 20 October, telling the readers that FIA was probing the deposed prime minister's role in the Bankers Equity case. *Khabrain* reported on 18 October that the deposed prime minister's family had defaulted on income tax worth Rs 225 billion. Another report in the press related to tax evasion by the family of the removed prime minister. Omer Kureshi's column in *Dawn* on 19 October criticized the former prime minister. From November to December as the new government settled down, the newspapers largely started giving stories and statements critical of the action and supportive of parliamentary democracy. *Nawa-i-Waqt*, *Dawn* and *Pakistan* adopted a balanced policy as they carried stories and statements criticizing the action and calling for return of democracy and strengthening of parliamentary system. They also gave space for clarification from the deposed prime minister. For example, *Pakistan* carried a statement that clarified the deposed prime minister's position, and *Khabrain* carried a statement of a son of the former prime minister that was monitored from VOA, clarifying the family position. Number of these stories increased in proportion to the stories on corruption and bad governance. However, when the spouse of the deposed prime minister made efforts for the release of her husband, stories on personal corruption appeared. In the last week of December, stories related to plane hijacking case. *Khabrain* and *Jang* also held surveys, in which people demanded strong action against the removed prime minister.

Conclusion

The study was focused on exploring bias in the press with regard to the removal of the government in 1999. It drew upon a theoretical framework that included agenda setting, framing and media bias. It explored bias of journalists and press organizations in the matter of news selection and use of sources. Set in the context of democracy in Pakistan, and media's role in democracy, a content analysis was done that

found that the press in Pakistan did not show a pro 12/10/1999 action bias, which is a mature attitude as the press in the country has worked under pressures and influences both by authoritarian governments and regimes and market economy, the latter are aptly reflected in the filters of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. This shows that the press is gradually moving towards a social responsibility model, which enjoins upon it responsibility towards society. Commitment to democracy is also evident. With more capacity building, training and instilling of virtues of democracy and civil rights, journalists can be prepared to play a vital role in Pakistan's transformation to true democracy. A study on TV channels can be carried out from the same perspective, as TV did show a great potential in the movement for judiciary, and also because they are now facing criticism for being a destabilizing force in political system.