

Media Ownership and Regulation Influencing Production of Prime-Time Television News Bulletins in Pakistan

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Abstract *With the challenges of shifting technology and the rise of social media, the television news industry is struggling, yet news media in Pakistan is still relevant. Nevertheless, audiences are still unaware of the agenda-setting involved. Therefore, this article attempts to study the impact of certain factors on news performance and rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan. Through mixed methodology, survey technique was used on a specialized sample of 150 staff from the top fifteen news channels. Through literature review, three independent factors were identified and to predict their impact, the dependent variable of bulletin performance review was formulated. Results were derived from the quantitative and qualitative method. Survey data was inserted in SPSS and test of regression applied. Results predicted Channel Owners' and PEMRA significantly impact news in Pakistan, while Government guidelines have no impact. With the exclusivity of newsrooms and restricted public access, this study gives a rare Sneek peek into Pakistani newsrooms.*

Key Words: Production, Prime-time, Television, News, Bulletins, Pakistan, BBC.

Introduction

Today contemporary media plays the significant role of providing “information, education and entertainment to the masses” and television has become one of the most popular and valuable sources of communication ([Rupa, 2015, p. 40](#)). Though digitization is fast changing the media market landscape and Internet has become quite popular. Yet, broadcast television remains the first choice of investors and advertisers, all thanks to the viewership attracted by sensational news bulletins, heated debates in current affair shows and dramas. With the current high demand and reach of news media in Pakistan, it will be most appropriate to say that news broadcast through television channels is the most-watched and popular form, that the public seeks for “a quick snapshot of the world and society” ([Daredia, Zehra and Rasheed, 2013, p. 24](#)).

In modern society, news media plays a crucial role in shaping people's opinion in Pakistan about almost everything. With no existing code of conduct and ethics for the Pakistani news media, these news channels show live transmission of terrorists' insurgency, natural disasters, political conflicts and much more ([Sarwar, 2014](#)). With limitless power to influence the masses, the news channels face aggressive competition to more significant, better, controversial and quicker news that is different and sensational. Media's immense

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power and its impact were also studied by [Baig and Cheema \(2015\)](#), who stressed that media “attempts to establish itself as the ‘fourth estate’,” and in this pursuit, the news media in Pakistan seems to have “completely derailed from its original mandate of public service” (p.6).

Unconcerned about the impact, Pakistan has a mushroom growth of news media yet it “seems to be lacking objectivity, impartiality and spirit of public service” [Baig and Cheema \(2015\)](#).

Information in the shape of news that people get nowadays is filtered through several phases until it acquires its final form and reaches its destination. From news construction to dissemination, various agenda, propagandas and framing is done, to acquire desired results ([Yousaf, 2012](#)).

Therefore, this phenomenon can be studied under the theory of agenda-setting, framing and Chomsky’s propaganda model.

One cannot ignore the fact that news has become more of a business today rather than information dissemination. For a news channel, the best-selling hour in primetime: 7:00 pm to 11:00 pm, when they consider that the entire family sits together for a meal or after dinner. Multinationals and big corporations invest millions of rupees worth of advertisements to be placed in those primetime slots ([Gitlin, 1995](#)). Therefore, the primetime news bulletin, usually around 9:00 pm in Pakistan, is the top priority of every news channel.

So how is news bulletin produced and their rundown decided? The most crucial aspect and the crux of this study are identifying media regulatory factors that affect the rundown production of a news bulletin and assessing their impact on news dissemination. Key factors studied in this paper are Channel Owners’, Government Guidelines and PEMRA.

With limited access to newsrooms and news channels, this topic holds great importance and value in modern times when news builds our perception of the society, we live in. The researcher chose to take up this topic as she works in the news industry and wants to bridge the gap between academic research and the professional field of journalism. More importantly, this area is relatively unexplored and very few social science researchers, especially in Pakistan, have ever taken up a topic that is related to news production. Moreover, the prediction of future trends stated at the end of this study can be used for further studies and as a basis to understand the working of Pakistani news channels.

Research Aim

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To review previous research on media regulatory factors that impact rundown production of primetime television news bulletins.
2. To assess the impact of media regulatory factors of channel owners’, governmental guidelines and PEMRA on the rundown production of a primetime television news bulletin.
3. To predict the impact media regulatory factors on rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.
4. To make recommendations for future research in rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses have been derived from the factors identified in the light of relevant literature and through the gap in the literature review that need further research:

H1: News channel owners’ impact the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

H2: Government guidelines impact the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

H3: PEMRA impacts the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

Literature Review

News is a tricky business and interpreted differently by everyone. Unlike the print media, the establishment and quality of television news have always been accepted in Pakistan as a legitimate area for government intervention. The rationale for this lies in a combination of the inherent power of broadcasting to address large audiences. Since the inception of television broadcasting in Pakistan in 1964, to protect the public interest, the broadcast media in the country remained was controlled by the state/government. Only after 40 years, with the introduction of partially state-owned TV channels in the late 1980s, it revolutionized the electronic media landscape. Followed by this, the government of Pakistan legalized cable TV operations in the year 2000. This led to the establishment of regulatory authority by the name of PEMRA. And then there was no revolution except television.

According to the research by [Khan and Rehman \(2013\)](#), from 2002 to 2005, satellite and cable channels tripled in Pakistan and resultantly, advertising spending on them "increased from Rs200 million to Rs3.5 billion" (para.5). But more recently, since 2008, the economy has plunged, and in turn, advertising has dropped to relatively low. But even that did not discourage new channels from being launched. Similarly, [Gallup Pakistan reported in 2014](#) that the number of cable television licenses rose to about 2700, with almost 13 million cable connections. In Pakistan, a cable connection is priced at around Rs.200 to 300 per month that gave rise to a parallel industry with "annual turnover of Rs.46 billion" (p.10).

This drastically changed the Pakistani media industry. As news evolves every day, similarly its industry operations are also going through a rapid transformation. Yet designing a news bulletin is not as easy as designing a newspaper. To understand the politics underlining the construction of a news bulletin, it is important to understand its design process. According to Barbara [Alysen \(2012\)](#), the producer draws a draft rundown of the news bulletin, drawing on lists of likely stories supplied by the sources and the editors. The planned bulletin rundown is likely to change throughout the day as some stories fail to live up to expectations and are either dropped or downgraded. These are the black and white factors but then come in the grey factors which need further investigation to understand how rundown of news bulletins are manipulated for organizational, political and personal benefits.

In a recent study, [Islam and Marjan \(2013\)](#) found that the Bangladeshi TV channels emphasize on covering news related to political parties and the government much more than others, especially in the primetime bulletins. In Pakistan, the primetime slot is traditionally 7:00 pm to 11:00 pm. Before the boom of private news channels in Pakistan, the state television, PTV's flagship news bulletin, 'Khabarnama' (news-hour), was aired at 9:00 pm ([Khan, 2011](#)). Back then, it was considered to be the only primetime news bulletin that was religiously watched by the majority of mature audiences. Even today, in Pakistan, the battle of TRPs is for the 9:00 pm bulletin across all news channels, and for its success, rundown production is of core importance.

Another relevant study was recently carried out by [Ahmed and Osmani \(2014\)](#) in Bangladesh, analyzing news items, news formats and priorities of two news channels, Bangladesh Television (BTV) and ATN Bangla. The results of this study indicated that most news stories served as a propaganda tool for the ruling party and the interests of the owners; therefore it indicates that the most important influencing factors are ownership and governmental control. On the other hand, Malaysian scholar [Latif \(2014\)](#), in an attempt to study the evolution in Malaysian television news industry, found some key factors that affect the news production. They included guidelines from the government, advertisements, ratings, links of the owner and inexperienced news staff. Although he did not test each of these factors in his study, rather his focus was mainly on government control over media.

Research on media ownership by [Latif \(2014\)](#), suggests that the decisions of content or story selection for the news bulletins are based on numerous considerations amongst news value and timing, primarily media ownership.

Focusing on the most controversial factor, governmental control, past studies show that, Doordarshan, India's only state-run television channel, had politicians and civil servants calling the shots, in terms of content, decisions for the programming and editorial policy ([Pink, 1989](#)). The most obvious example of this was the television coverage of the 1989 elections in India when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi contested for the state head, and there was hardly any coverage of the candidates from the opposition party.

As for media regulatory authorities and censorship, in the UK, The Office of Communications (Ofcom) regulates commercial television and radio stations along with the [BBC \(Inbrief, 2018\)](#). In America, this task is performed by three US regulatory agencies, including the FTC ([Lule, 2012](#)). In Pakistan, PEMRA was established for the same purpose, under PEMRA Ordinance 2002 (PEMRA, 2006, para. 1). Yet since its inception in 2002, the role of PEMRA in media censorship and licensing has been quite controversial. Yet its impact and control on the private electronic media can surely not be ruled out ([Din, 2018](#)).

For the theoretical framework, the core assumption of this study lies in [Shoemaker's Organizational Theory \(1996\)](#), as it explains the factors that can impact news, news bulletins and most importantly, newsroom hierarchy. The second chosen theory is Herman and Chomsky's Propoganda Model (1988) that also tried to define news through their 'propaganda model'. Third and last theory is the concept of Framing or Frame Analysis (1974). Usually framing is a conscious choice by journalists – and the researcher aims to use this theory to assess how the news media as gatekeepers establish and propose the ideas, events, and topics they want and in terms of rundown, how many highlights they give to a particular news/person.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed-method approach has been used with quantitative research as the primary method, as the concept of news production propaganda and factors affecting news bulletins, has already been explored by foreign researchers: [Ahmed and Osmani \(2014\)](#) and [Latif \(2014\)](#). Yet the qualitative method was only used to support the primary approach: quantitative method, used for testing this research area in a Pakistani context, thus a confirmatory study in nature. Therefore, conducting a newsroom study in Pakistan through a quantitative method, the researcher has been able to predict future trends in this area. Selected variables to be studied are the media ownership and regulatory factors that impact the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan. The chosen tool for this study is a specially designed survey questionnaire to acquire data from news channels in Pakistan.

The dependent variable for this study was 'Bulletin performance review', while the independent variables were 'Media ownership,' 'Government Guidelines' and 'PEMRA.'

The universe of this study is all the television news channels of Pakistan. According to PEMRA (2018), currently, there are 50 licensed news channels operating in Pakistan. At the same time, the population of this study are media workers, (editors, anchors, news producers, rundown producers, program producers, associates and assistants, sub-editors, copywriters, non-linear editors, broadcast engineers) permanently employed at Pakistani news channels. And for the sample, out of 50 news channels, the researcher selected the top-rated 15 news channels of Pakistan based on the 2015 report of Media Logic Pakistan, an organization that provides ratings to the Government of Pakistan and all news channels. From these 15 news channels, 150 media workers were chosen randomly who worked on the primetime shift.

Two-stage sampling has been done for this quantitative study. In stage 1, the highest-rated national television news channels of Pakistan were chosen through purposive sampling. In stage 2, the researcher at random selected ten production members from the primetime team of the top fifteen electronic media

newsrooms from across the country. The news production staff includes Director news, executive news producer, news producer, news controller, news editor, associate and assistant news producers, bureau chiefs, non-linear editors, reporters and anchors. Primetime news bulletins refer to the 7:00 pm to 11:00 pm slots.

In the absence of a standard or model primetime television news bulletin in Pakistan, the standard had to be studied and derived from a global origin. Thus, as part of the mixed-method approach, the qualitative method was used to develop the dependent variable: Bulletin performance review. An interview was conducted with the BBC primetime news producer Jacky Martins at the BBC London head office in the United Kingdom and an assessment criterion was derived for marking of top fifteen news channels of Pakistan. Five independent research assistants observed the primetime television bulletins of top 15 news channels of Pakistan and marked them out of 100. The observation time was two weeks, and the observed primetime bulletins were of these news channels: Aaj News, Abb Tak, ARY News, Capital News, Channel24, Dawn News, Din News, Dunya News, Express-News, Geo News, Jaag TV, Neo, News One, Samaa News, 92 News (see Appendix-D).

To ensure that there is no biasness, collected data was inserted in SPSS software, and split-half reliability test was conducted. In addition to this, the test of regression was applied to the three factors against the dependent variable of bulletin performance review. Test of regression was conducted to assess what level of influence a factor has on the news bulletin and thus predict future trends. To ensure the ethical validity of the study, the researcher assumed an objective position. The identities of the interviewees were kept confidential, and the observed news channels have not been reported by their original names.

Results and Discussion

Data was coded (Appendix-C), and responses of 150 questionnaires were inserted in SPSS to apply the test of regression. Questions under the three factors (Channel Owners', Government Guidelines and PEMRA) were computed to form three independent variables. In the first step of statistical analysis, simple linear regression was individually applied to the two newly computed variables, against the dependent variable (Bulletin Performance Review), to predict their effect on rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan. The test results are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Estimated Results for Regression of the Independent Variables against the Dependent Variable of Bulletin Performance Review.

S. No	Variables	Beta	Significance
1	News Channel Owner's Influence	.801	.000
2	Government Guidelines	.346	.207
3	PEMRA	.795	.000

Interpretation: Estimated results for regression conclude that Channel Owner's influence ($\beta = 0.801$, $p < .05$) and PEMRA ($\beta = 0.795$, $p < .05$) are significant predictors. On the other hand, Government Guidelines ($\beta = .346$, n.s.) is not a significant predictor.

News Channel Owners' Influence

H₁: News channel owners' impact the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

Table 2. Estimated Result for Regression of Owners' Influence against Bulletin Performance Review.

Variable	N	Beta	Significance
Channel owners' influence	150	.801	.000

The impact of channel owners' on the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan is statistically significant. The hypothesis is accepted because the results of the test of regression show a significant impact of channel owners' on the rundown production of news bulletins in Pakistan. The results show that if there is a 1 unit increase in channel owners' variable, the bulletin performance review will increase by .801 (beta value). This shows a strong association.

This association and impact were previously researched by Latif through a study conducted in 2014. Latif concluded that the decisions of content or story selection for the news bulletins are based on numerous considerations amongst news value and timing, primarily media ownership. He further elaborated the impact and said that in order to understand how editors make decisions, it is pertinent to consider the power and interference exercised by the owner and how it impacts the rundown decisions taken in a newsroom. Previous studies and data through this research conclude that basically, it is a trickle-down effect of power and decision-making from the channel owner to the management that impacts the rundown production of news in Pakistan. Through the questionnaire, respondents were asked about the role and involvement of the channel owner in news production. Their responses and the test of regression results show that channel owners impact news production through their personal policy, by overlooking work in studio and newsroom and also by issuing instructions in the form of notices. Thus, data and statistical tests prove the hypothesis true that channel owners do impact rundown production of television news bulletins in Pakistan and performance of news channels. Whether this is a good practice or not, that is debatable.

Scholars like [Latif \(2014\)](#), do not judge the power of the media owners and study the aspects of media control only. But at the same time it is pertinent to analyze whether this control by channel owners' results in balanced and objective news media or a partial media, that is a puppet in the hands of the rich. This makes it even more important to understand what kind of impact do channel owners' exert on news channels that in turn shape the content and the bulletin produced. In the case of this study, results indicate that this impact is positive, and channel owners' seem to be influencing Pakistani news channels to produce better primetime news bulletins. But this impact will differ case to case.

If we analyze the case of media ownership in Pakistan, [Shah \(2015\)](#) sums up the situation by terming three long-term private media giants dominating Pakistan; the liberal Jang Group, owned by the media magnate Mir Shakeel-ur-Rahman who now runs Geo News, the Nawai Waqt Group, which treads a right-wing line, and the English-language Dawn Group, the most moderate of the three. In addition to this, Shah says that large corporations like ARY and the Lakson Group (Express-News) have acquired media companies after discovering that controlling media can protect their corporate interests. So, media groups like Dawn are considered moderate and their owner Hameed Haroon is considered to control the company with a professional approach as he lets the news editor control the content while he himself ensures that the organizations' approach is objective ([Siddiqi, 2017](#)). They are thus demonstrating that some media owners' do have a positive impact on news production. On the other hand, owners like Mir Shakeel ur-Rehman and ARY newsgroup are openly criticized for their biased and politically driven news production ([Khan, 2017](#)). Thus exhibiting that media owners' do have the tendency to negatively impact the news production process; it all depends on the channel owner how he uses that power.

It is pertinent to mention here that this impact of channel owners' on news production is also deeply embedded in the concept of media conglomerates. As [Shah \(2015\)](#) also revealed in his study that media Mughals who control media content and media distribution have excessive control over generating views and information that they deem appropriate. Adding to it, Gutierrez (2004) further describes that this must be studied and researched because this level of control and access to power can be extremely dangerous and harmful for any democratic state. And in the case of Pakistan, media conglomerates have used this power to campaign for the political parties of their interest, thus making media biased and a puppet in the hands of the political players. In the words of Hamid (2018, para. 7)), "certain media groups are seen

voicing their own opinions in favour of a certain political party while opposing the others; thus damaging the journalistic ethics."

Governmental Guidelines

H₂: Governmental guidelines impact the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

Table 3. Estimated Result for Regression of Government Guidelines against Bulletin Performance Review.

Variable	N	Beta	Significance
Government guidelines	150	.346	.207

The impact of governmental guidelines on the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan is not statistically significant. The proposed hypothesis is not accepted because government guidelines had no significant impact on the performance of news channels and the rundown production of their primetime television news bulletins. The beta results show that if there is a 1 unit increase in the variable of governmental guidelines, the bulletin performance review will increase by 0.346. This shows a weak association.

Respondents were asked to identify the coverage and broadcast demands by the government, any attempt by news channels to please the government through rundown change or air-time allocation and instructions to news channels by the government, regarding news coverage and broadcast. The responses were computed, and the researcher applied the test of regression to predict the impact, but no significant results were derived. Although in the literature review it was established and past researches by [Pink \(1989\)](#) in India, [Jernow \(1994\)](#) in China and [Miles \(2010\)](#) in Egypt established that their respective governments had a strong control and impact on the news media, especially rundown production and news content of the television bulletins. Yet the findings of this study do not resonate with those studies. Thus in Pakistan, the government guidelines have no impact on the performance of news channels and resultantly have not impacted the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins.

PEMRA

H₃: PEMRA impacts the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan.

Table 4. Estimated Result for Regression of PEMRA against Bulletin Performance Review.

Variable	N	Beta	Significance
PEMRA	150	.795	.000

The impact of PEMRA on the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan is statistically significant, and the proposed hypothesis is accepted. The beta results show that if there is a 1 unit increase in the variable of PEMRA, the bulletin performance review will increase by 0.795. This shows a strong association.

The reason for this impact can be the power and regulatory role of PEMRA in Pakistan. Unlike the state control on media in countries like China, here in Pakistan, this role and the associated power has been given to PEMRA. Respondents were asked about their news operations being in line with PEMRA rules and how have their news channels suffered the penalty for violating those rules. The results were computed, and the test of regression showed a strong β value of 0.795. In the case of this study, results indicate that this impact is positive and PEMRA seems to be influencing Pakistani news channels to produce better primetime news bulletins. But this impact will differ case wise.

The results of this study re-confirm earlier finding in this area. [Din, 2018](#) researched in this domain and concluded that PEMRA's fine and suspension of news channels and their programs had forced channels to pull up their socks and follow the PEMRA rules. Though he also pointed out that PEMRA's role is sometimes controversial and has been criticized for attempting to regulate media content instead of regulating the sector, yet this does not lessen its impact. In 2014, Pakistan's leading news channels, ARY and Geo News were forced to shut down by PEMRA, for a certain number of days. [Amnesty International \(2014\)](#) termed it as an 'attempt to control freedom of expression', yet it was defended by PEMRA as a disciplinary action taken as a result of the violation of its code of conduct. Similarly, on several occasions, PEMRA has fined several news channels for airing unverified news about the country's security situation and the judiciary that they term is mandatory in order to regulate the media and discourage false reporting.

Those in favour of PEMRA's power and role, state that news channels do not have a self-censorship method; therefore, it is necessary for a body to regulate them ([Iqbal, 2012](#)). Others find PEMRA's role to be curbing freedom of expression and serving the interests of the government ([Klasra, 2016](#)). This is a debatable topic, yet the impact of PEMRA on news bulletin production and bulletin performance is evident.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the impact of certain internal newsroom and external factors on the rundown production of primetime television news bulletins in Pakistan. This topic was important because news media plays a crucial role in shaping people's opinion in Pakistan about almost everything [Sarwar, 2014](#) and information in the shape of news that people get nowadays is evidently filtered through several phases. From news construction to dissemination, various agenda, propagandas and framing is done, within the newsroom and outside, in order to acquire desired results by the news empires ([Yousaf, 2012](#)).

In this scenario, news channels are the active players, and the audience is passive. As [Baig and Cheema, \(2015\)](#) rightly concluded in their research that news media in Pakistan is striving to establish itself as the 'fourth estate' and in this pursuit, they have completely derailed from the original mandate of 'public service'. Resultantly, instead of aligning themselves with the public, media has aligned itself with various interests

Limitations

The sample size was limited to 150 news professionals working at the head office of the sample news channels, while the chosen sample was limited to primetime production teams that worked in two shifts: 12:00 noon to 8:00 pm, and 4:00 pm to 12:00 midnight. Participants of the chosen sample were always in a hurry and had limited time and attention to fill the survey. Although the researcher personally sat with the respondents to get the questionnaires filled, yet due to time constraints, most interviewees were only able to commit 20 to 30 minutes. Another limitation was the sample size of 150 news professionals. This sample size from each channel was small as news professionals are limited in number, and those working in the primetime team are even fewer.

Contributions

Research-wise, major key-players that can impact the news channel was initially identified by [Ahmed and Osmani \(2014\)](#) who researched on governmental control. The present study identified an additional key-player: media regulatory authority. Secondly, this research developed a dependent variable through content analysis. In Pakistan, there is no standard news bulletin, and there is no criterion to assess the performance of news channels. In this study, an assessment criterion was devised and resulted formulated the variable called, Bulletin Performance Review (Appendix-D). This study is one of its kinds; a rare insight into the working of the top newsrooms in Pakistan. Therefore this study holds great importance as it gives you an

insight into the newsroom operations of not one but top fifteen news channels of the country. The results will help practitioners understand how PEMRA can help improve the performance of news channels. Working journalists will also be able to understand the newsroom operations and how media regulatory factors can impact the process of news production. In addition to this, channel owners, editors and news directors will be able to evaluate their power and decision making that leads to rundown production and news broadcast.

Recommendations

The data collected in this research is very confidential and important at the same time. It reflects the working and newsroom decision-making of the top-rated fifteen news channels of Pakistan, basically the big industry players who shape the news in Pakistan. Hence this study gives the news channels, data and an opportunity to understand the working of not only their own newsrooms but also those of their rivals. Principally, it can help news editors analyze and identify these patterns in their news channels and then deal with the practices that may be harmful, unethical or wastage of resources. Secondly, newsroom committees can be formed that might review their own rundown production of news bulletins. For researchers, there is hardly any data about newsroom operations, hierarchy and decision-making involved in the news bulletin production in Pakistan. Through the results of this study, researchers can formulate the base for future research work. Moreover, findings of this research suggest that PEMRA, the media regulatory authority impacts the production and performance of news bulletins in Pakistan. Thus, through this data, policymakers can ascertain the level of impact and design the working of PEMRA in a way that the impact is positive rather than controversial. For further research, it is suggested that other key players like channel owners, their shareholders and marketing departments should also be included in the studied sample. Moreover, the sample population can also be increased.

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