

Reporting of Taliban Conflict: Do Editorial Choices Matter?

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the discursive strategies that characterize the reportage of Taliban conflict in Pakistani media, over a period of one year from March 2015 to March 2016. This study combines textual analysis with semi-structured interviews of media editors to identify the key factors that influence conflict Journalism in Pakistan and particularly explores the crucial role played by the editors in the selection of news stories related to Taliban conflict. Using Burkhard Blasi's model as a theoretical framework, the study found that Pakistani media characterize Taliban conflict in the country, as a high-risk national security threat. Hence, the findings of this study show that conflict reporting in this scenario is influenced by a number of factors and the editors' perceived threat to national interest.

*Keywords:* Taliban Conflict, Conflict Reporting, Textual Analysis, Interviews

## Reporting of Taliban Conflict: Do Editorial Choices Matter?

### Introduction

This study has been designed to analyze the discursive strategies that characterize the reporting of the Taliban conflict by Pakistan's two prestigious English and Urdu language newspapers; the *Dawn* and *Daily Jang*, over a period of one year from March 2015 to March 2016. The study focuses on the prime sources that govern the conflict Journalism in Pakistan and particularly explores the crucial role played by the editors while reporting of this conflict.

The news media are so much a part of our days, as people are dependent on the media to provide accurate and timely information on current events from around the globe. Mass Media are so much important because different segments of modern societies communicate through media (Schaefer, 2006). Conflict, by its very nature, holds a forceful attraction for the mass media. Many researchers (Cho & Lacy, 2000; Galtung & Ruge, 1965) asserted that media coverage by Western countries is a tilt towards disasters and conflicts with an emphasis on conflict-oriented news. Conflict reporting is among the oldest journalistic styles in media around the world. Since the late 19th century, important conflicts have been covered by the war correspondents (Hussain & Lynch, 2016).

Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) have highlighted the crucial role of the media in contemporary societies. Generally, media have massive power with respect to their interpretations over the variety of news. Simultaneously, Schaefer (2006) has observed that media has varying interest in covering wars and conflicts, as key political decisions are at stake and thus media coverage can be classified in terms of diverse contexts with a broad range of interpretation (Schaefer, 2006).

### **Literature Review**

With the global character of media, the main source of opinion building and information includes writers, working Journalists, editors, producers, and broadcasters. Covering conflicts or war has been an interesting field for reporters. Baral (2011) writes out that media houses flourish on conflicts. The headlines are often related to wars, conflicts, disasters, and crimes. Violent conflicts are like a magnet that attracts people towards the media (Baral, 2011).

Sreedharan (2013) writes that significant resources are being invested by national, international and local news organizations to report the violence and conflicts, by and large the war correspondents that march to conflict zones attempt to report on what they witness as objectively as possible, in the best traditions of their profession (Sreedharan, 2013). Carruthers (2000) writes that war coverage is not simply a mirror image of the world as it is, rather based on the broad interests, preoccupations, and values of a particular society or of its dominant groups (Carruthers, 2000).

Shoemaker & Reese (1996) contends that several organizational and routine forces affect the media content. Furthermore, their hierarchy of influences model refers to five different levels of influencing factors, routine, individual, organizational, extra media and finally the ideological level. Ultimately, the news organization and its workers must function under the ideological constraints by society (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)

According to Herman & Chomsky (1988), the media propagandize on behalf of the powerful elites and serve their interests, their agendas and finances eventually shape media policy. Selection of like-minded editors, journalists, and other media personnel helps in accomplishing objectives of these powerful elites. Furthermore, Herman & Chomsky establishes

that domination of governmental and private institutions along with the interests of the buyers and sellers is usually reflected in the media's reporting (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Blasi (2004) conducted an empirical study to investigate the influencing factors over the production of Journalistic reporting in conflict and war times, findings of this study show that six factors influence editors and individual Journalists and overall the production of conflict coverage, including structural domain of the media that includes, editorial procedures, policies and Secondly, on-site situation. Thirdly, the personal characteristics of the Journalists. Fourthly, Political environments including the country's current policies and interests and that of economic-cultural relationship. Then the lobbies and Audience of the media (Blasi, 2004).

Hussain and Lynch (2016) while analyzing media reporting on five conflicts from Pakistan, contends that number of factors including, professional constraints, national interests, socio-political effects content of news about armed conflicts. Findings of this study also show that Pakistani media report the Taliban conflict from a high-risk security perspective, and media personnel will not follow the perspective on the conflict against the military and political if it perceives a high-level threat to the national security (Hussain & Lynch, 2016).

### Research Questions

The following questions were posed in the study to discuss the media reporting of the Taliban conflict.

RQ.1: What discursive strategies characterize Pakistan media reporting of Taliban Conflict?

RQ.2: What are the factors that influence the reporting of Taliban conflict in Pakistan media?

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this study is qualitative in nature, examining the discursive strategies that characterize the media reporting and to identify the key factors that influence reportage of Taliban conflict in Pakistan's prestigious newspapers, one English-language daily "Dawn" and one Urdu-language daily "Jang" for a period of one year spanning from March 2015 to March 2016. Qualitative research is selected as the primary method, as the intention of the research is to explore and gain greater insight into reporting on that reporting. This study uses Blasi's (2004) model of influencing factors of conflict coverage production and follows the data analysis approach of Van Dijk (1991). Additionally, to gain a thorough understanding and offer insight into the sources that influence the journalists, semi-structured interviews were conducted with media editors on Taliban conflict. The interviews were sourced from two national dailies (*Dawn & Daily Jang*).

In order to analyze the reportage surrounding the Taliban conflict, this study was conducted using the textual analysis. Due to its critical and in-depth analysis of cultural and ideological assumptions, textual analysis is considered to be the most effective technique to assess sources within the media content. A critical textual analysis of the selected editorials of two newspapers offered a close assessment of the discursive strategies used by media, and also how the editorial choices characterize the Pakistani media reporting of Taliban conflict. Textual analysis emerged in the 1960s and became accepted in the field of social science research. According to Van Dijk, (1991) textual analysis can critically analyze texts to ascertain meaning, also known as discourse analysis.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data were drawn from Pakistan's two leading English and Urdu newspapers, namely *Dawn* and *Daily Jang*, and from interviews with media editors on Taliban conflict. The collection has been made through electronic versions of the newspapers for a period of one year i.e. March (2015) to March (2016). In total 20 editorials were collected from both the newspapers, including 10 from *Dawn* and 10 from *Daily Jang*. The editorials were narrowed down and selected for the study, according to the relevance of the content in the editorials.

At first, all the editorials were critically analyzed and the major themes were identified, by using textual analysis technique. After completing the textual analysis, the researcher moved forward to further identify the factors influencing media reporting. The researcher through email explained that she is conducting research regarding the reportage of Taliban conflict in Pakistani media and is searching for media editors to share their opinions and experiences, the email also contained the interview questions.

Altogether, two telephonic interviews were conducted with the media editors from *daily Jang* and from *Dawn*.

### Research Findings

The present analysis is based on 20 editorials (10 from each newspaper) on the Taliban conflict and two semi-structured interviews with media editors from two national dailies (*Dawn* & *Daily Jang*) a valuable data set is presented here to address three research questions.

### **RQ.1: What discursive strategies characterize Pakistan media reporting of Taliban Conflict?**

The first research question of the dissertation asked, through a careful textual analysis (socio-cultural practice) of the editorials from both the newspapers. Three important themes emerged from the data analysis are (1) Taliban as terrorists and extremists (2) favoring military operation to disrupt the Taliban's network (3) Taliban a a threat to National Security. Both the media outlets forward more or less the same themes in their reportage of Taliban conflict.

### **(1) Taliban as Terrorists and Extremists**

Under this discursive strategy, Taliban were reported as Terrorists, Militants and Extremists in the editorial content of both the newspapers (*Daily Jang* November 29, 2015; *Dawn* March 15, 2015, *Dawn* January 21, 2016). Typically, Editorials retrieved from *Dawn* and *daily Jang* reported Taliban as militants, an evil force and terrorists threatening the writ of the states. Hence this is line with previous research findings (Hussain, 2014; Qayyum, 2013) to analyze the discursive strategies used by media in reporting the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban have been designated as homogenous militants group, devoid of any good deed. *Daily Jang* (November 16, 2015) content encompasses the main narratives of the Taliban as 'militants' in particular and 'extremists' in general. As reported by *Dawn* (January 21, 2016),

*“Monstrous as the Taliban are and have been, the determination with which they kill children and young adults come as a shock each time”.*

A general observation is that the editorials suggest that military operations are meant to target militants in order to re-establish law and order in FATA. Same editorial *Dawn* (21 January 2016) reports that



*‘And what the militant extremists are seeking to destroy. They must not win. Essential as it is to physically eliminate militancy, the very idea of the Taliban needs to be defeated too by making Pakistan a peaceful, democratic and constitutional land’.*

In another editorial by Dawn (15 March, 2015) entitled as ‘Militants Pact’

*“the military has claimed dozens of militant casualties in air strikes in the region and that is expected to be only the start of intense action against militants there”*

The military and news reports like, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) is referenced in most of the editorials (*Dawn*, 12 November 2015). Interestingly, not a single editorial argues the claims made by the military and government officials with regard to terrorists. In this way, it is in line with findings of the study by (Qayyum, 2013) that media construction of Tehreek-E-Taliban Pakistan image is influenced by official sources. Editorials *Daily Jang* (7 July 2015) and (*Dawn*, January 21, 2016) also referenced the Governmental sources, for its policy and action against terrorists.

*“However, after floating a 20-point National Action Plan, shepherding through parliament the army-demanded 21st Amendment and taking a few, scattered steps against extremist and militant elements”.*(*Dawn* 29 January 2015).

and similarly *daily Jang*(16 August, 2015) while referring to the speech of President Mamnoon Hussain reports,

*‘As a result of successful military operation in Waziristan, thousands of militants have been killed’.*

Words like a terrorist, militant, and extremist were found to be linked with the Taliban in the editorial content of the newspapers. Moreover, the Taliban were blamed for fighting the Pakistani forces and thus violating the writ of the Pakistani state, and their existence would disrupt the state apparatus. This representation of Taliban in media is not entirely detached from ground realities. This construction of the Taliban was narrated by the state, military and by few powerful elites.

While reporting on Taliban conflict, the Pakistani media dependence on military and official sources renders conflict Journalism as a propagandist. The editorial content of both newspapers, declare Taliban as extremists and terrorists who are fighting and killing armed forces. This stance is also supported by the findings the many other studies (Shabbir & Lynch, 2016; Qayyum, 2013; Shams, 2011) while analyzing the media's reportage during conflicts. Not a single editorial highlighted the killing of innocent local people as a result of military operation in FATA.

Pakistani media consider itself as genuine information disseminator, strangely, while covering this conflict media do not consider discussing all perspectives of this conflict. The Pakistani media do not discuss the conspiracies and varied interests of different stakeholders (Saudi, Iran, India, and Afghanistan) in relation to the Taliban conflict. Hence, the editors and reporters not sharing this perspective have to prove themselves as patriotic, for securing the national interests and more importantly, not to diminish chances of their promotion in the profession.

## **(2) Favoring Military Operation to Disrupt the Taliban's Network**

The second discursive technique used by the media in its editorial content while covering Taliban conflict is to stress “Long-Term Military Operation to disrupt the Taliban’s network” in FATA. ‘*This is a long war. It will not be won in a month or a year. It will be many years before Pakistan can truly be rid of the militant curse*’ (Dawn, 21 January 2016), and ‘*The military had always suggested there would a second phase starting this month*’ (Dawn, 15 March, 2015).

The army-led operation is presented as the only solution and fruitful in that the militants are being killed or driven out of the areas which resulted in better security and control of forces in those areas. Pakistani media depicts the military operations as great success against Taliban, thus presents the military operations as the effective strategies to settle the conflict in the country. Hence, this is in line with previous studies (Ersoy, 2006; Ross, 2008) analyzing the role of the media in conflicts and wars, where they side one group over another, thus provoking violence and supports force as the only solution.

According to editorial content, *daily Jang* (11 October 2015) and *Dawn* (28 November 2016) Pakistan’s military has taken major counter-terrorism actions in Khyber Agency and North Waziristan. Not a single editorial from two newspapers highlighted those thousands of local people, which have been displaced in this conflict.

*Dawn* (24 March 2015) while emphasizing the importance of military operation and successful short term gains from an operation against militants established the need for long term military operation. As in same editorial ‘Military operations, against militancy and terrorism will likely be squandered in the long term’. Similarly, editorial by *daily Jang*(11 October, 2015) ‘*whole nation is united to end militancy, to achieve peace in the country*’ and *Dawn* (28

November, 2016;9 June,2015) depict the military operation against terrorists as great success so far, in which large numbers of militants are being killed while a few army personnel are also getting martyred. The phrases such as zero-tolerance policy against militancy, heavy-handed counterterrorism measures and dismantling militants groups (*daily Jang* 8 November 2015; *Dawn*, January 19, 2015) are thus justifying a military operation to fight Taliban. Moreover, media depiction of these events supports the anti-Taliban narratives and favoring military operation. As *Dawn* (9 June 2015) while quoting Army chief Gen Raheel Sharif (during his visit to Sri Lanka for soldiers that were trained in Pakistan) reported,

*“We have successfully dismantled their infrastructure and created significant effects. We as a nation are determined to take this surge to its logical end, whatever it may take.”*

Notably, in this editorial (*Dawn*, 9 June 2015) military sources were referenced to narrate the conflict and military operation and different ISPR representatives, which present military point of view,

*‘an ISPR press release had this to say, “19 terrorists were killed including five of their commanders in an intense exchange of fire with security forces last night in uncleared pocket along NWA-Afghan border.”*

Uniquely, the same editorial also raises some concerns pertaining to the military operation against Terrorist in FATA. Firstly, the timeline by political and military leadership in the tribal agency. Secondly, measures to secure the Pak-Afghan border to stop re-entering of militants, and, level of efforts being made to eliminate terrorists’ leadership in North Waziristan. Moreover, it also reports on militarized strategy in FATA does not guaranty long-term peace in

this region. Interestingly, this editorial concludes that it was indeed a good decision to launch operation, this had been delayed under the government's approach of securing a peace deal with the Taliban. Media's stand on this conflict is clearly depicted through its editorial content that the dialogue process had given the Taliban space and time to regroup and consolidate. As *Dawn* (21 January 2015) reports '*They need to be buttressed by a long-term plan and strong measures to counter the poisonous narrative of the extremists*'

As *Dawn* (21 January, 2015) reports,

*'So while the stepped-up military operation in the northwest is a reminder of the consensus against terrorism that was formed in the aftermath of the Peshawar school attack last month'*

The editorials from both the newspapers present military operation in FATA to establish peace in the areas. *Daily Jang* (8 July, 2015) reports,

*'Within the one year of this military operation, significant effects have been noticed with regard to the peace and stability in the country'*

*Dawn* (9 June, 2015) reported,

*"Clearly, the present army chief did well by launching Zarb-i-Azb. It had been delayed too long under the previous military leadership and the political government's strategy of first trying to secure a peace deal with elements of the TTP had only given the militants yet more space and time to consolidate and regroup', and daily Jang(8 July, 2015) reports,*

*‘Within the one year of this military operation, significant effects have been noticed with regard to the peace and stability in the country’*

Moreover, under this discursive strategy, the editorial content of selected newspapers was categorical in depicting a fight against terrorists as a national priority. An editorial retrieved from *Dawn* (12 November, 2015) reported,

*“Fighting terrorism and militancy must remain a national priority. The civilians need to do more. The military needs to be wiser”.*

One reason for this slanted media reportage is that, since Journalists and editors do not have direct exposure to this conflict, they rely on the press releases issued by the Pakistani military (Hussain, 2014). Whereas, editorials analyzed for this study are dominated by official and military sources. The two newspapers haven’t highlighted and reported the possible weakness of military operation, as the military and government overlooked to coordinate with Afghanistan, just as during earlier military operations when Islamist militants escaped into the North Waziristan region, this time they may escape into Afghanistan.

### **(3) Taliban as Threat to National Security**

The third discursive strategy used by newspaper editors in covering Taliban conflict is a threat to national security, which is *‘challenged by militants’* (*daily Jang*, 8 November 2015). Hence, Media advocating that government and military can proceed against them to secure national interest. As, *Daily Jang* (7 July 2015) reports that *‘terrorists are a threat to national security and Army has been able to achieve success’*, with the launch of operation in Waziristan. Moreover, the same editorial presented operations as fruitful in that the militants are being killed

or driven out of the areas which resulted in better security for Pakistan. Media editors framed the Taliban as the greatest threat, not only to Pakistan but also to the whole region. Hence, newspaper editors framed the anti-Taliban narrative with respect to national security discourse in general. Hence, this is in line with the findings of (Qayyum, 2013).

*Dawn* (9 June 2015) presented the Taliban conflict as a strong threat to national security of Pakistan. Analysis of the media content reveals that editorial contents of both the newspapers, raise the voice in a national security context. The Pakistani media through its editorial contents declares the Taliban as a security threat to Pakistan. This is in line with previous research findings of many scholars (Shams, 2011; Siraj& Shabbir, 2012; Shabbir & Lynch, 2016). Media usually consider itself as a national institution and ought to prove it when the security of the country is challenged.

Hence, Editors from both the newspapers served their national interests, at the expense of journalistic values; priority was given to national interests, during reportage of Taliban conflict. Media is generally regarded as the fourth estate, which places responsibilities on the Pakistani press to provide a balance and neutrally account of reality while covering this conflict in its discourses. Editors, reporters, and analysts believed that media shouldn't remain silent against certain policies, which can damage national interests (Reese, 2001).

**R.Q.2: What are the important factors that influence media reporting of Taliban conflict?**

During interview sessions with newspaper editors on the Taliban conflict, a number of key factors were identified that influence the reporting of this conflict. These range from the threats from Taliban, pressure from Ulema (religious leaders), professional obligations, personal opinions of journalists, political factor, security issues, accessibility issue, financial constraints,

danger from military and editorial strategies and expectations. This is in line with the findings (Blasi, 2004). In which he identified six factors influencing conflict coverage production, and his model has also provided a theoretical framework for this study.

Editors from both the newspapers (*daily Jang* & Dawn) consider Taliban conflict as high-risk national security threat. This is in line with many research studies (Siraj & Shabbir, 2012; Shabbir, 2014; Shabbir & Lynch, 2016). An editor from *daily Jang* Ghulam Qadir admits that Taliban conflict is linked with regional security as well. It has implications for Pak-Afghanistan border security. Hence, this conflict is across the border issue and has an impact on Pak-Afghan relations. Furthermore, this editor motioned that, since there are no such restrictions on this border, terrorist (Taliban) escaped in Afghanistan. For instance, one local newspaper reports that “approximately 400 families of militant groups including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and al-Qaeda have crossed into Afghanistan in December and now they live in with locals in different remote areas of the country” (Express Tribune, 30 January 2016). Moreover, Taliban activities against Afghanistan Government also affects Pak-Afghanistan relations, though Pakistan is not involved in issues there, but, Pakistan is always blamed for such activities by Taliban. Whereas, Pakistan is a facilitator in the dialogue process between Taliban and Government of Afghanistan and always wants peace and stability in the region.

When asked about the factors that influence media reporting of Taliban conflict, editors discussed an array of a factor, as editor from *daily Jang*, Ghulam Qadir highlighted that Ulema (religious leaders) greatly affects their reporting patterns on this conflict with Taliban. They somehow hold a soft corner for Taliban and favors them.



Having said that, this editor emphasized, these Ulema's pressurize media on reporting of this conflict. Furthermore, threats to media houses from Taliban also influence their reportage. This editor reminded of once Taliban "threatened to Jang Newspaper". Both the editors mentioned, they mostly rely on single military source ISPR for news related to Taliban from Waziristan, hence in this way our reporting is influenced by a military source. When it comes to national interest, we have to follow national philosophy which is pre-declared against Taliban. Furthermore, Politics, economic factor, financial issues and expectations of the publisher are also determining factors for news surrounding the Taliban conflict. These interview findings are also in line with Blasi's (2004) study, in which he identified structural factor as great relevance to conflict coverage production.

Moreover, media editors highlighted that accessibility to the conflict area (Waziristan) due to security conditions for Journalists, and restrictions imposed by Pakistan Army as influencing factors, for which neutrality is compromised and media becomes biased while reporting on Taliban conflict. An editor from *Dawn* said that accessibility to a war zone is one major factor, as due to security issues Journalist can't go to such areas; they can either go with Army or with the Taliban. He further said danger from both sides (Army & Taliban) is another factor influencing coverage of sensitive stories related to this conflict.

On the question of threats from the army, Taliban and influence of personal opinions of journalists against Taliban, editors from both media houses said that threats influence their reporting to great extent, since, every journalist considers Taliban as an anti-state entity. This way their individual opinion surrounding Taliban also affects their reporting on this conflict.

Regarding the question of balance reporting of this conflict, editors said that through its professional obligation to retain balance reporting, media cannot remain neutral while reporting on terrorist, as they are our enemies and killing our security forces. Though Editor from *daily Jang* also mentioned "media should not exaggerate and glorify Taliban conflict" but, he also said that since the Pakistani forces are carrying out an operation against terrorists in Waziristan, Pakistani media should not support Taliban, as it may destroy the very essence of this military operation. Moreover, an editor from *Dawn* said that media should observe balance reporting of this conflict but it should not tilt towards the Taliban". When it comes to national interests, the media becomes biased and neutrality is compromised.

#### Conclusion

This study analyzes the discursive strategies that characterize the media reporting of Taliban. Additionally, to gain a thorough understanding and offer insight into the sources that influence the media reporting on this conflict, semi-structured interviews were conducted with media editors on Taliban conflict. The study focuses on the prime sources that govern the conflict Journalism within the context of national interest and particularly explores the crucial role played by the editors in the selection of news stories related to Taliban conflict.

As found in the study, journalists consider Taliban conflict as high-risk national security threat. Hence, this is in line with many research studies (Siraj & Shabbir, 2012; Shabbir, 2014; Shabbir & Lynch, 2016). As one editor from *daily Jang* Ghulam Qadir admits that Taliban conflict is linked with regional security and has consequences for Pak-Afghanistan border security as well. Hence, the media has framed the anti-Taliban narrative with respect to the national security discourse. In such a scenario, the news media gives way to the elitist discourse.

Dependence on powerful elites makes media subservient (Hallin, 1986; Wolsfeld, 2010). Findings of the interviews with media editors suggest that media while reporting on Taliban conflict, which it perceives as a threat for the existence of state and society, patriotism and nationalism, are the major influencing factors on its coverage. As Schudson (1989) writes that during threats to national security Journalists willingly temper their reports. In his view, “at times of public danger, tragedy, and threats to national security “there are no sides. We are all in it together” (Schudson, 1989).

It can be concluded that during media coverage of this conflict, Journalistic values of objectivity and neutrality are compromised and highly influenced by patriotic sentiments and hence, editors and Journalists are caught between profession and nation. Media should criticize the policies and decisions of powerful groups (military & Government), and it should also highlight the wrongs in their policies. Though, editors admit that professional obligations and journalistic values demand media to remain objective, but when it comes to national interest media cannot report Taliban conflict objectively and hence, conflict journalism in this scenario is influenced by a number of factors and the perceived threat to national interest.

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