Tracing Media Audience Relationship Through Agenda Setting

A Study of Cable News Channels in Pakistan

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Abstract

The aim of this research study was to trace the relationship between media presentations and public priorities. To trace the media and public relationship for media influence on the public through agenda-setting, four issues Pak-US relations, energy crises, and national reconciliation ordinance were studied on two leading news cable channels, *The Express* and *The Geo News* Randomly selected news shows and bulletins for a period of one year have been examined to gauge the media agenda while a survey to cable television viewers of two news channels has been conducted separately to check the audience's agenda on these issues. 156 news bulletins and the same number of prime time talk shows were analyzed through agenda-setting and framing models to gauge media agenda. Results confirmed strong connections between media's issues salience and audience's issue priorities on four understudied issues. Correlations were measured from r +0.66 to r +0.90 with p value less than .001. H1 and H2 have confirmed the strong media influence on the public priorities in ranking the understudied issues.

Key words: Audience Agenda, Cable channels, Correlations, Media Agenda, Media influence

Introduction

Today, the digitized media has acquired the power to change the information production and consumption patterns in this contemporary society. After influx of cable channels in Pakistani media landscape, there has been notable change in peoples' access to information with diversity of viewpoints and feedback. The 'time' between news event and news delivery has reduced with sophistication of communication technologies. The raw idea about having private cable channels to counter the Indian propaganda at different regional and global forums, during and post Kargil war 1999 became materialize in 2002 by allowing private parties and investors to establish cable network in the country.

In the early months of this initiative the print media industry was remained much active in getting this opportunity to be materialized. In this way trend of cross-media ownership has been continued in country's media landscape with sharp growth dominantly. Dominating the newly established cable network by big media groups like *Jang and Geo, Ary* and *Nawai-e-Waqt,* no tremendous transformation was witnessed in the running patterns of the print media content generation on political front. Instead these news channels have been creating awareness and guidance on political and social issues among the masses. It is a general public perception after lifting the ban on the establishment of private channels, the options to get comparatively free and fair news information have been increased. *Mukhtaran Mai* rape case in 2002, earthquake 2005, Red mosque operation 2007, restoration of judiciary 2007, Swat military operation 2009, *US* attack on *Bin Laden's* compound 2011, *Salala* Check post attack 2011, election 2013 and 2018 and law and order were some significant national issues on which the news channels have arranged extensive debates and deliberations which helped the masses to make opinions on these national issues.

Walter Lippmann's in 1920 stated that "people have only limited opportunities to get news in their real life as first hand but they more or less dependent on media to give them news and updates".

Witnessing a recent history in Pakistan regarding cable TV channels, viewers, comparatively got more options to interact, discuss on new developments in taking decisions on political and social issues.

After having private cable channels, audiences have some understanding watch dogging of the media and its importance in highlighting corruption, embezzlement, bad governance, nepotism, social evils, abuse of power of the government and the opposition as well. In recent years the mainstream media especially electronic media of the country have been able to explore some high-profile corruption cases against the government like Hajj corruption case, ephedrine case, Swiss money laundering cases, rental power case, media gate, steel mill, OGDCL corruption case etc. The present study focuses on the assumptions of the model how media-agenda influenced the people-agenda through salience of issues on four widely discussed issues Pak-US relations, energy crises, law & order and national reconciliation ordinance on two mainstream channels The *Geo* and *Express News*.

Literature Review

Since the first documented study presented in 1972, the theory of agenda-setting is considered to be one of the most utilized theories in different political and non political setups. McCombs and Shaw (1972) examined a strong association on media salience and voters' beliefs and priorities of the same highlighted campaign issues.

Following Lippmann phrase ''world outside and the pictures in our heads" (McCombs & Shaw). While working in UCLA, McCombs exposed to Cohen's work and had great interest that how does media effect on public opinion? Then during US presidential election in 1972, McCombs and Shaw investigated and proved strong links between media's agenda and people's agenda (Rogers, 1993).

Lyengar, & Kinder 1987 & Lyengar, 1993, of the view that ''agenda setting is a cognitive progression understand as "accessibility".'' People mostly are dependent on second-hand information to make perceptions about the world around them. Because of this media dependence, one becomes a media dependent. In addition, this reliance of viewers gives power to media for becoming 'agenda setter' for audiences (Michael, 2011). Werner & Tankard (1997) says "agenda-setting is one of the

possible ways that the mass media can have an effect on the public." Walgrave (2006) of the view that "for three decades, the notion of agenda-setting has provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and communications research." The successful transfer issue salience is not an outcome of few media messages rather a result of constant and a large number of messages like a campaign (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

The study about effects in broadcast media by Brosius & Kepplinger was conducted in 1990 in West Germany. A survey to audiences and a content analysis of respective media confirmed an influence on four topics European politics, defense, environment protection and energy supply out of total 16 issues. They also examined unexpected and in-depth media coverage of issues leading to the public awareness. The investigators found significant correspondence in channels and audiences significance of the problems highlighted in programs, (Werner & Tankard, 1997). Erbring et.al (1980) have explored that people who heavily depend on media for getting news on politics could be more likely as agenda-setting influence as compare to the people who do not have much reliance on media rather they interact with family and friends and other channels of political communication, (Huckins, 1999).

Since, today's greater part of news media is centred on political news a great percentage of coverage is based on un-obtrusive issues, therefore, being more media reliance, the salience transfer from media to public has been a successful exercise. While key source of news in obtrusive queries is interpersonal communication with family, friends, and colleagues, the role of agenda-setting function of media for transferring the salience is rather less successful as the people are well informed to resist any attempt of transferring manufactured agenda. "The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and have feelings about." (McCombs & Shah, 1972) "The media, sometimes, by exaggerating and less coverage of the issue proportionally exert the salience in the public's mind" Raza (2014).

McCombs et.al. (1997) confirmed that "agenda-setting research at the second level deals with the influence of 'attribute' salience, whereas the first level agenda-setting illustrates the influence of 'issue' salience." Lynger and Kinder (1987) cited Bower, (1985), "by a wide margin, they believe that television - not magazines, not radio, not newspapers - provides the most intelligent, complete, and impartial coverage of public affairs, and goes furthest in clarifying the candidacies and issues at stake in national elections." Tim (2008) further states that:

> "Research has consistently found that the frequency of issues covered in the news can have a profound effects on the issue priorities held by the public in this way, the news media highlight important issues of the day, and the news consumers process these salience cues in determining what they perceive to be the most important issues within a society."

Balmas and Sheafer (2010) observed that "attention at the agenda-setting which highlights role of press in telling us "what to think about" has been shifted to role of press towards telling us "how to think about" at the second stage of agenda-setting." This shift and dimension of agenda-setting is considered how the agenda of features moves public opinion (McCombs & Evatt, 1995). The second stage of agenda-setting is signals of transferring the characteristics and qualities of the issues focused. It is more or less an activity of referring the previous stored thoughts and beliefs of the audiences to the current problem. Though the theoretical grounds of these two media effect theories are diverse in form and nature, however, McCombs and few other communication scholars viewed them at the same core group.

Conversely, framing can be used to predict how the public will form their opinions reliant on form of the subject in question. According to McCombs 1972 that political campaign does hold the statement that interpersonal factors were important predictors in agenda setting effects. The information is delivered not only through media presentations and personal experiences but arranged networks of the social interaction. In this way, information travels in three stages. In the first stage viewers get information from media outlet, in case of some new information they try to discuss it with their friends and family and in the third stage they become carriers for the same message. Through this process, some desired salience is passed-on and this activity never ends since communication is

an ongoing and dynamic process. Based on literature review and earlier research the following hypotheses are posed to verify the phenomenon in question:

  H1. *Electronic* media agenda will have an influence on viewer's agenda on national issues.

  H2. *Express News* and *Geo News* will successfully transfer the salience into public priorities on the issues of Pak-US relations, energy crises, law & order and national reconciliation ordinance.

Theoretical Framework

The major theory utilized in this study was agenda setting. However, considering the complementary role of other media effects theories to agenda setting effects framing, priming and gatekeeping were applied too. "Agenda-setting is a robust and widespread effect of mass communication, an effect that results from specific content in the mass media" McCombs (2004).

Methodology

McCombs (2014) of the view that, "the most common measure of the salience of issues on the media agenda is the number of news stories about each issue in the media over some period of time. There are more complicated measures, but simple frequency counts work very well."

Variables - Content Analysis

- *Frequency***:** Story in news bulletins and talk shows that last for at least 45 seconds was selected for data analysis.
- *Slant:* Story presented in bulletins and news shows telecast will investigate favorable and unfavorable towards government.
- *Frame:* The viewpoint of a news item tells whether the story is pro or anti-government. The whole news item will analyse as a contextual unit.
- *Placement:*
  In this research study, three slots have been designed in the news programs like opening, middle and last slot.

Survey Research

Five hundred regular audiences of these two channels based in Islamabad were approached separately. Though the survey is limited to the capital but it characterizes the audiences TV viewing habits of whole country because the inhabitants belong to different parts of the country.

Variables - Survey Analysis

- *Ranking:* An ordinal scale will be used to observe salience of the news issues by giving a list to assign a rank order.
- *Opinion:* Valance for a particular news issue will investigate through some survey questions.
- ***Discussions with Family & Friends***
  It is a normally a common practice that after getting some new information from some communication channel, people want to know about it and try to discuss with their family and friends to empowered their stance on the particular issue.

Data Collection

News bulletins and news shows downloaded for one year from Ist Oct 2011 to 30 Sep 2012 to discover the media-agenda. News bulletins and news talk shows of prime time were used as samples for content analysis. Counting the stories was a method to check the media agenda. Two popular talk shows '*Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath*' of *Geo News* and *'Kal Tak'* of *Express News* were selected. A closed ended questionnaire was prepared to get the answers from audiences of two leading channels in face to face meeting.

Findings and Analysis

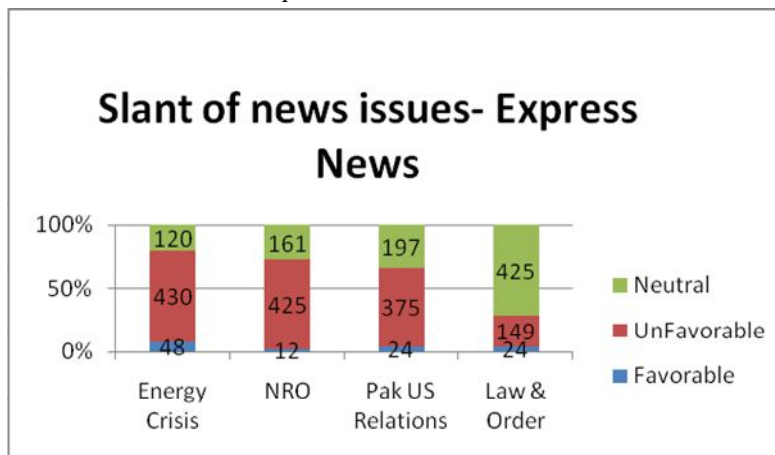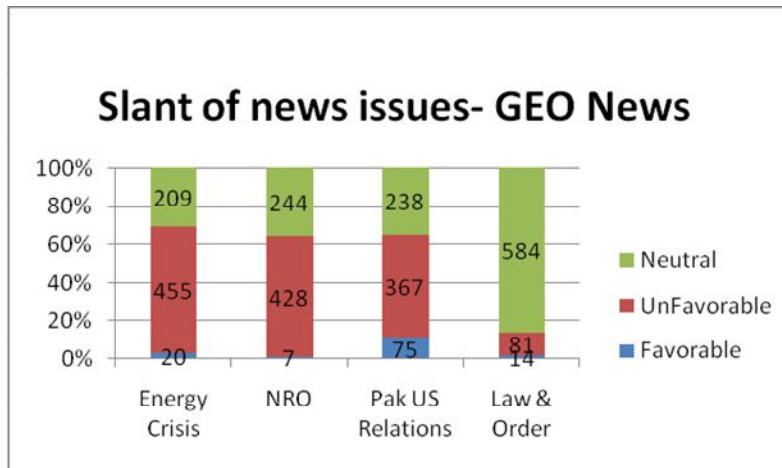Figure 1 Slant of News Issues-*Express News*   .

Figure 2 Slant of News Issues-*Geo News*

Figures 1 and 2 above illustrate both *Geo* and *Express News* were telecast a substantial share of news issues negatively. Pak-US relations obtained 54% unfavorable slant from *Geo News*. *Express News* has also remained critical by giving 63% unfavorable slant. *Geo News* provided 67% stories unfavorably while *Express News* gave significant share by giving 72% of its coverage unfavourably on energy crises.

Express News has given 7% unfavorable slant to the issue while *Geo News* gave 63% news unfavourably on the issue of NRO. *Geo News* covered this issue neutrally while *Express News* was critical towards government. Express and Geo News have covered this news item neutrally as 71% and 86% respectively.

Table 1 Framing of Issues

	Express News		Geo News	
Issue	Pro-govt.	Anti-govt.	Pro-govt.	Anti-govt.

Energy Crisis	20%	75%	15%	81%
NRO	17%	80%	2%	84%
Pak US relations	20%	78%	18%	73%
Law & Order	3%	27%	3%	16%

The coverage of issues by both the channels shows a very clear line of anti-government as depicted in Table 1. *Geo News* gave73% while *Express News* provided 78% anti-govt. frame to Pak-US relations. *Geo* and *Express News* channels broadcast 81% and 75% respectively in an unfavorable frame on energy crisis. *Geo News* provided NRO 84% in an unfavourable frame while *Express News* was not too much different as it framed 80% stories in the same category. On the same pattern, the most covered issue of law & order on these channels have been framed as anti-government. As for as the placement of the news stories is concerned it has been observed that *Express News* kept 91% news on Pak-US relations in an opening slot in its bulletins and news shows. *Geo News* distributed the same news item all-around by giving almost equal percentage of news stories in its three slots. Further it tells that *Express* and *Geo News* placed 50% of their stories on energy crisis in its mid slots in news bulletins and news shows.
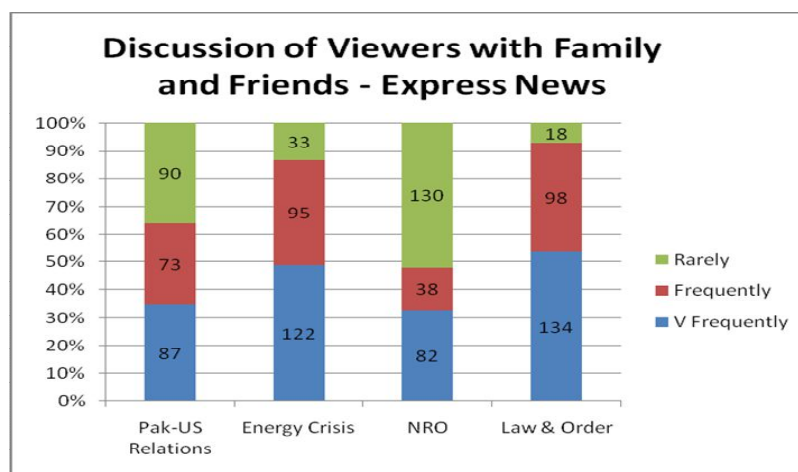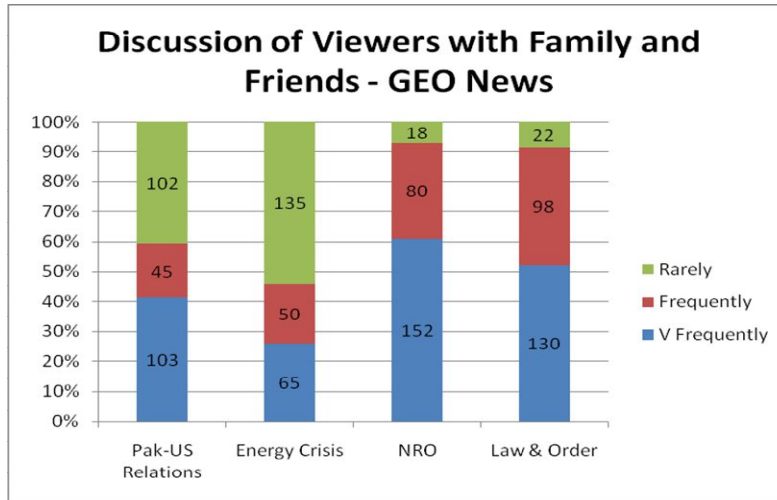
Figure: 3 Discussion by Viewers

Figure: 4 Discussion by Viewers

Figures 3 and 4 describe audiences of these channels have consistently discussed all the four issues. Viewers of these channels have discussed energy crises and law and order very frequently.

Table 2: Correlation on the issue of Pak-US relations

News Issue	Public Agenda	Media Agenda
	Priority - Pak US relations	Coverage - Pak US relations
Priority - by Viewers	1	.859**
	250	166
Coverage- by *Geo News*	.859**	1
	166	166

**. Correlation is significant

A significant correlation +.86 and strong relationship have been observed on Pak-US relations as revealed above.

Table 3: Correlation on Energy Crises

News Issue	Public Agenda	Media Agenda
	Priority - Energy Crisis	Coverage - Energy Crisis
Priority by Viewers	1	.668**
	250	
Coverage by *Geo News*	.668**	1

		118	118

**. Correlation is significant

Viewers of the *Geo News* have discovered a considerable correspondence between news coverage and the rank order selection. A moderate correlation of +.67 has been observed.

Table 4: Correlation on NRO

News Issue		Media Agenda	Public Agenda
		Coverage - NRO	Priority -- NRO
Coverage by *Geo News*		1	.704**
		116	116
Priority by Viewers	Pearson-Correlation	.704**	1
		116	250

**. Correlation is significant

As shown above, there has been a considerable association of +.70 discovered between the exposure of NRO and viewers' ranking.

Table 5: Correlation on Law & Order

News Issue	Public Agenda	Media Agenda
	Coverage	Priority
Priority by Viewers	1	.902**
	250	250
Coverage by *Geo News*	.902**	1
	250	279

**. Correlation is significant

As revealed as above, positive correlation +.90 is measured between coverage and the ranking order of viewers.

Table 6 Correlation on Pak-US relations

News Issue	Public Agenda	Media Agenda
	Priority -- Pak US relat	Coverage -- Pak US relations
Priority by Viewers	1	.785**
	250	125
Coverage by	.785**	1

Exp News		125	125

**. Correlation is significant

There has been a noteworthy correlation +.78 observed between priority given by the viewers and coverage by the channel on Pak-US relations.

Table 7: Correlation on Energy Crises

News Issue		Media Agenda	Public Agenda
		Coverage	Priority
Coverage by *Exp News*		1	.747**
		101	101
Priority by Viewers		.747**	1
	N	101	250

**. Correlation is significant

As shown in Table 7 significant correlations +.74 has been observed between channels coverage of energy crisis and rankings given by the viewers of Express News.

Table 8: Correlation on Law & Order

News Issue		Public Agenda	Media Agenda
		Priority	Coverage
Priority by Viewers		1	.902**
		250	250
Coverage by *Geo News*		.902**	1
	N	250	279

**. Correlation is significant

Table 9: Correlation on the issue of NRO

News Issue		Public Agenda	Media Agenda
		Priority	Coverage
Priority by Viewers		1	.669**
	N	250	92
Coverage by media		.669**	1
	N	92	92

News Issue		Media Agenda	Public Agenda
		Coverage	Priority
Coverage by *Exp News*		1	.747**
		101	101
Priority by Viewers		.747**	1
	N	101	250

**. Correlation is significant

There is a notable correlation of +.66 existed on the coverage of National reconciliation ordinance and viewers' priority as evident in the above table.

Discussion

The basic inquiries of this research study were to gauge correlation between coverage by media and rank-order by audiences of the two mainstream news channels *The Express* and *Geo*. Four independent variables frequency, slant, frame, and placement were the key mechanism to explore media agenda through content analysis. On the other hand, to check the public agenda a survey was designed to get the priorities of the viewers through posing four factors like ranking, discussion, opinion, and standpoint on these issues. Two research hypotheses were set to inquire the assumptions of the study.

Pak-US relations are affecting the public indirectly due to the policies and steps taken against war on terror. The issue of law & order for media was a hard area to address, therefore, every citizen's life was at danger due to unending activities of extremist groups within the country. Law and order was remained the most covered issue on both the channels during one year. There was a perfect correlation on the issue between audience's ranking and media salience observed with r+.90 with *p* value ≤ .001. Energy crisis, is the second obtrusive issue and people experienced it in their daily routine and they do not just depend on media to get the information on the issue rather they discuss it through interpersonal communication channels with their family and friends (Zucker, 1978).

Findings of the study indicate strong relationships between media agenda and public agenda on all the four issues. A significant rank order correlation on Pak-US relations has been calculated with r.

value +.85 with *p* value ≤ .001 between media and viewers-agenda as shown in Table.2. On the other hand as depicted, in Table.6 r +.78 have been calculated on Pak-US relations on *Express News*. The relationships show the successful transfer of media salience to the public priorities on the issue by both the media outlets. At the same time, there is a solid alignment has been calculated between slant used by news channels on the issue of Pak-US relations to enforce the salience and the standpoint of the audiences. Slant is also an important factor of this research study, media teams generally strengthen their agenda by using media effects models like slanting and transfer attributes. However, reinforcement is not always a conscious effort instead it depends on some other uncontrollable variables.

The story that presents with slant does have some different outcome than that of the story without slant. The same has been achieved in the case of Pak-US relations, as the media remained critical toward policies of the government in most of their stories. A significant correspondence in opinion of the audiences and media presentations has been found in both the channels. Coming to the viewer's discussion on the issue, it has been examined that audiences of these media outlets discussed the issue frequently.

Prominence is one of an important variable in agenda-setting domain of the media. The story that publishes in the front page will get significant attention of the audience than the story on the back page. In this research project, there have been three slots designed to judge the prominence given by the media. The issue of Pak-US relations was remained as opening news items of bulletins and news talk shows. The outcome describes consistent with key assumption of the theory.

Energy crises were the third most focused issue on both these channels with 17% of the total coverage of four issues. Audiences gave rank this issue as the second most important news issue facing by the nation. There has been a considerable relationship found in media's projection and audiences' priorities on the issue. A correlation of +.74 with *p* value ≤ .001 has been calculated on the issue on *Express News*. A moderate correlation +.66 with *p* value ≤ .001 has been noted between coverage of the issue by *Geo News*. *Geo* and *Express News* were critical toward government and they gave 67% and 72% unfavourable slant to the news regarding energy crises. As a result, the opinion of

the audiences became associated with the slant of the media. The role of interpersonal communication in exerting the media issue salience to audiences' priorities has been established. The results of the study remained reliable with the research findings of Zucker (1978).

As stated above, a strong correlation +.70 on N.R.O while correlation +.66 was examined on *Geo and Express News* respectively. Study reveals these channels were successful in setting the public-agenda. NRO was the least projected issue on these channels and on the same lines audiences of *Express* and *Geo News* given almost least priority to this issue among four understudied issues. As far as the placement is concerned, both the channels gave prominent place in bulletins and news shows as shown in Tables. Anti-government frames have been observed on both the channels. The majority of viewers have discussed the issue with family friends frequently and ultimately they become carriers of media agenda to their family members and friends, though this is not always a conscious exercise.

Conclusion

The results of this research project on four issues demonstrate substantial relationship between media and people agenda. To determine public agenda both the channels manipulated frequency of news and news slant. Strong consistency and correspondence between viewer's standpoint and the slant of issues have been examined. The main purpose of this study was to verify the basic assumptions of media effects theories which say "among dozens of news stories, media determines what to be published or what not to be published. Since People have only limited opportunities to get first-hand information, people dependent on media to provide latest news. This dependency of the people is exploited by Media to set the Agenda".

The study reveals both the media outlets have frequently used these models to set and reinforce the media agenda on the public priorities. The media has given an anti-government frame while they rarely practiced pro-government frame which further reinforce the media agenda to set the public agenda. The findings show that placement of the news stories have some substantial influence to be helpful in selection of the news which ultimately left agenda building effects among viewers. It is established that electronic media is capable to affect the public opinion in democratic, semi

democratic and non-democratic societies through using the media effects models like agenda setting, framing, priming and gatekeeping. The outcomes of the research study have strongly supported *H1*; electronic media agenda will have an effect on the public agenda. *H2*; *Express News* and *Geo News* will successfully transfer the salience into public priorities on the issues of Pak-US relations, energy crises, law & order and national reconciliation ordinance.

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