

Liking the sound of their own voices: A case of TV anchors and their shows

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper was to tap the role of anchorpersons of talk shows in promotion of media agenda and shaping political reality through measuring correspondence between time consumed by the anchorpersons and panel of experts. For the purpose, systematic random sampling technique has been used to select prime time talk shows of Geo News for one year. On the basis of wide coverage, three issues memo gate, law and order and corruption were selected to gauge the relationship between the variables. The results show a significant correlation between slant for the issues and time consumed by the anchors has been observed on all the three issues. The results showed that more the time grabbed by anchorpersons, more the programs remained in unfavorable state towards government. The results also revealed that 71% of total talk shows' time was grabbed by the anchorpersons while panel of experts allotted 29% percent time in the issues. Anchorpersons remained unfavorable and biased in its deliberations towards government to a great extent by snatching the maximum time of the programs for molding the public opinion in a certain direction.

Key Words: Cable channels, Agenda-setting, Talk Shows, Anchorperson & Experts, valence of issues.

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Introduction

Today, the digitized media has acquired the power to change the information production and consumption patterns in the contemporary society. Media is believed to be a mirror of a modern social system. After the influx of private cable channels in the arena of Pakistani media landscape, there is a notable change in peoples' access to information with diversity of viewpoints. The time between an event occurring to news delivery has reduced with sophistication of technology. From 1999 to 2002, the first half of Musharraf's regime, was crucial in terms of settling down and legitimizing his illegal takeover. General Musharraf enjoyed the international support being an ally of war on terror.

The raw idea of having the private cable channels to counter the Indian propaganda, during and post Kargil war became materialize in 2002. Private parties, investors were invited in the new horizons to initiate the cable network in the country. In the early months of this initiative, owners of print media industry were welcomed and started some channels like, Geo News, ARY News etc. The trend of cross media ownership has been continued in Pakistani media landscape with sharp growth dominantly. Dominating the newly established cable network, no tremendous transformation was recognized in the running patterns of the print media contents. However, these news channels have been creating awareness and guidance on political and social issues among the masses. Mukhtaran Mai rape case in 2002, earthquake 2005, Lal masjid operation 2007, restoration of judiciary 2007, Swat military operation 2009, US attack on Bin Laden's compound 2011, Salala attack 2011, election 2013 were some

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considerable national issues on which the news channels had arranged extensive debates and discussions, helping the masses to make opinions on these issues (Raza, 2010).

The anchorpersons of the cable news channels are independent to a great extent in their talk shows for slanting the issues; however, some policy guidelines are given to the news section of the particular media outlet. The current interactive channels have changed the traditional patterns and have created political and social awareness in the country by introducing the anchorperson based shows. People in their leisure time do watch news commentaries and talk shows to get updates on national as well as international issues. Yusuf & Shoemaker (2013) of the view that:

“In the coming years, the role that Pakistan’s broadcast and digital media play in the country’s politics is likely to become even more important. The quality of the media’s contribution will be defined not simply by the quality of the actual media itself, but by the institutional context in which it operates.”

The people, comparatively, are now in a better position to assess the watchdog role of the media highlighting corruption, embezzlement, bad governance, nepotism, abuse of power etc of the government and the opposition as well. Sometimes, anchorpersons use this power for their personal projection and try to meet personal ideology. The media in recent years have been able to cover some high-profile corruption cases against the government like Hajj corruption case, ephedrine case, Swiss cases, rental power case, media gate, steel mill, and OGDCL corruption case. The irregularities in the appointments, postings and transfers of the heads of some prestigious institutions of the country have also been criticized excessively on cable channels. Another version of critics on highlighting these corruption cases in media have seen as ratings-run game and have been observed as an anti-government rhetoric.

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Since partisan projection of this issue, the media critics do not consider it as the watch dogging by these channels. Law and order has one of the most covered issues in media for the last decade. Some news channels covered the issue of law and order in their news bulletins regularly but they were reluctant to discuss it in their talk shows. The news channels generally and Geo News particularly covered the issue of memo gate extensively even live coverage was arranged during hearing of the case in tribunal from United Kingdom. In covering all these issues anchorpersons did not remain unbiased and ultimately the general perception and opinion whether positive or negative remained consistent with the slant of the issues.

This research paper will try to explore how the electronic media activism impacts the overall political and social behavior of people in Pakistan in recent years during democratic regimes. Analytical and quantitative approach has been adopted especially the portions dealing with burgeon growth and establishment of cable channels and the role of anchorperson in the light of agenda setting theory.

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Literature Review

Michael (2011) of the view that “since the early 1970’s, the belief that mass communication is a powerful force has gained strength, in part from studies that document a correspondence between the amounts of media attention an issue receives and the amount of public concern about the problem.” Among media effects theories agenda setting has become the most practiced theory since its first practical application in US Presidential election 1968. McCombs & Shah, (1972, 1976) pointed out, “people learn from the media what the important issues are.” In a short history of cable channels in Pakistan, people comparatively got more options to interact, discuss on new developments in taking decisions on political and social issues. At the same time, masses and critics of these channels are witnessed fierce rating run on the part of these channels.

Media and particularly private news channels covered some national issues extensively like law and order, Pak-US relations, National Reconciliation Ordinance, democracy, corruption, energy crises etc. during the last few years. Lynger & Kinder (1987) quotes 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.” Walsh (2012) quoted Raza of Jinnah Institute quoted to New York Times, "The credibility of the electronic media is at stake."

Khan (2012) quotes Farish (2011) that

The term anchorocracy has negative connotation due to the bureaucratic attitude of the anchorpersons belonging to different private news channels whose ultimate desire is to impose their opinion and thought on audience. Anchorpersons want to dictate the audience mind on sensitive issues with

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a firm belief that they are promoting national interest and audience should follow their lines.”

The anchorpersons of cable channels are normally snatched more time slot than the time allotted to the guests or experts. They impose their predetermined conclusion of the discussion what they normally bring about through anchorocracy. Munir (2011) a column writer quotes Farooqi (2011), “many anchors push us believe that everything is going wrong, all is bad as if any of the governments, be it federal or provincial, is not doing anything in the interests of the people. There is no hope at the end of the tunnel.” Further due to the low media literacy level people become easy prey to these manipulated news as Zucker (1978) said:

“The audience they have little direct experience with some issues in their real life they get easily be influenced by the media manipulations as they do not have another source to have knowledge about the issue”

Although these talk shows mostly covered the political issues, however, humor based programs are increasing on these channels those also levied political content to a great extent. Since the majority of the owners of these newly established cable channels belong to print media industry, therefore, majority of the anchorpersons got opportunity to opt as anchorpersons, reporters, cameramen, editors, producers etc. There was no proper training arranged for these migrated media persons from print media to cable news media. Moreover, trends and ongoing set policy of the media organization remained intact in spite of having relatively free media in terms of content generation and delivery. Munir (2011) further quotes Zahid (2011) that:

I know, but I do not want to name an anchor who had given almost 17 deadlines of fall of Zardari government since 2008 election. Every night, he comes on a private television and starts his analysis and ends up with a conclusion that the government is going to fall in next few days and whatever data he presents he never substantiated. He forgets that in

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*democracy only people elect and defeat governments and not the anchors.
Is it not 'anchorocracy' at the cost of 'democracy'?"*

The anchorperson hosting the program on one channel while he becomes an expert on some other channel regardless of the expertise is required for the issue. It is also a flourishing and emerging phenomenon that host in other words hijack the program by grabbing much of talk show's time and try to get away the expert from expressing his or her opinion on the matter.

In 2010, some anchorpersons of these channels assert that government has a plan to withdraw the reinstatement notification issued for removed judges in Musharaff's regime. It was premature information that created panic and uncertainty among the judges of apex court that in reaction warned the government to avoid taking such actions. Supreme Court further declared that such action of the government would be treated under article 6 of the constitution, which is called as high treason. The irresponsible act on the part of anchorpersons caused a conflict between government and apex court of Pakistan (Khan, 2012).

We have many examples of irresponsible attitude of the mainstream cable channels where channel telecast news without confirmation; for example Mumbai attacks in 2008, one of the leading channel in Pakistan disclosed that the attacker (Ajmal Kasab) was a Pakistani and reporter of the channel rushed to his home town to break the news. People and critics are of the view that it was too early to report that the attacker was a Pakistani. For many weeks, this controversy remained talk of the town in media's responsibility context.

There are normally two ways in these news channels to make the whole program in a desired direction by setting a certain tone through anchorperson's dictating style.

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For incorporating and aligning the media agenda, those experts are called who are remained consistent and consonance with the standpoint of the media. The second way is to restrict or restrain the experts for judgments or expert opinion, which is contrary to the agenda of the media organization. In the media environment and practices in Pakistan both these ways are within the instant access of the anchorpersons.

Khan (2012) quotes Nizamani (2010), “media has shaped a new power sharing segment in society known as anchorocracy, where anchorpersons from different channels not only try to impose their opinion and thoughts but also indirectly indoctrinate the public with the ideology premeditated by the anchorocracy.” Ethnic society like Pakistan where many different segments live together, the media has a force to bind, rebind and sustain the prevailing social integrity. The phenomenon of private cable channels in the country is not very old; however, it is enough to be rooted. Critics of media has the consensus that Pakistani media do follow its own liking and disliking and try to focus and present one side of the picture and most frequently grabbed maximum time of the talk shows for manipulation.

Khan (2012) further cited Vigna & Ethan (2007) as “media play an important role in shaping the political preferences and belief of voters. He argues that media collects information, summarizes it and frames it according to its own preferences which influenced the voting decisions of voters.” Zaidi (2011) of the view that “Pakistan’s media is guilty of being a microcosm of the society that it reports on reports for and reports to. It is a reflection and an extension of Pakistan at large.” (pp 230). Farah (2018) opined that “Media is playing its role in a responsible way but few anchors make it

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different. They often divert the attention of the people from the real issues to non issues on command and desires of the people they are working for”.

Anchorperson is a team member of the media outlet and conscious about the agenda of the media organization. Through valence, framing and priming techniques of agenda setting, anchorpersons try to impose the media agenda on audiences. In this whole process of media-public relationship for exerting the media salience as public priorities, anchorperson has a central role. In other words, one can say that anchorpersons exploit his powers to direct an issue to a certain direction. People in the country welcomed the cable TV industry as they have been watching state-run TV channel for many years. The single state-run TV is being used as a mouthpiece of government. Moreover, literacy rate in the country is very low and people like to have cable connections to watch a number of channels acquiring different viewpoints.

In 2012, there was a media controversy involving a well-known anchorperson of a private channel and Malik Riaz, a business tycoon. The anchorperson blamed that he organized a planted interview with Malik Riaz to malign apex court in the case of media gate scandal to restrict Chief Justice in taking any decision in contempt of court case against the then Prime Minister, Gillani (Khan, 2012).

There is some serious debates among media intellectuals, politicians and other stakeholders of the media regarding objectivity and impartiality of the anchorpersons on different socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious perspectives. And also to measure whether the ethical framework is being followed or otherwise in their presentations? Ashraf & Islam (2014) were of the view that:

“This activism manifests itself in sensationalism in reporting of events, superficial debates, blowing trivial matters out of proportion, insensitive

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exposure of tragic events, graphic presentation of gory scenes, intrusion into people's privacy and non-professional live coverage of law enforcement operations.”

Since the life of the cable channels is about two decades, media researchers have not explored the phenomenon of ‘anchORIZATION’ frequently; however, some studies on the perception of the audiences on the role of anchorpersons have been witnessed in the country. It is a wide open area of research to measure and inquire the phenomenon by getting and exploring through content analysis – a media perspective. The study will be of vital importance for news channels, anchorpersons and for audiences as well. On the basis of literature review the following hypotheses are posed to enquire the phenomenon:-

- H1 Anchorpersons of ‘Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath’ will snatch more time than the experts during talk shows.
- H2 There will be a positive relationship between anchorpersons’ time and slanting of issues for a certain direction.
- H3 The anchorpersons of ‘Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath’ of Geo News will bias towards government on the issues of law and order, corruption and memo gate.

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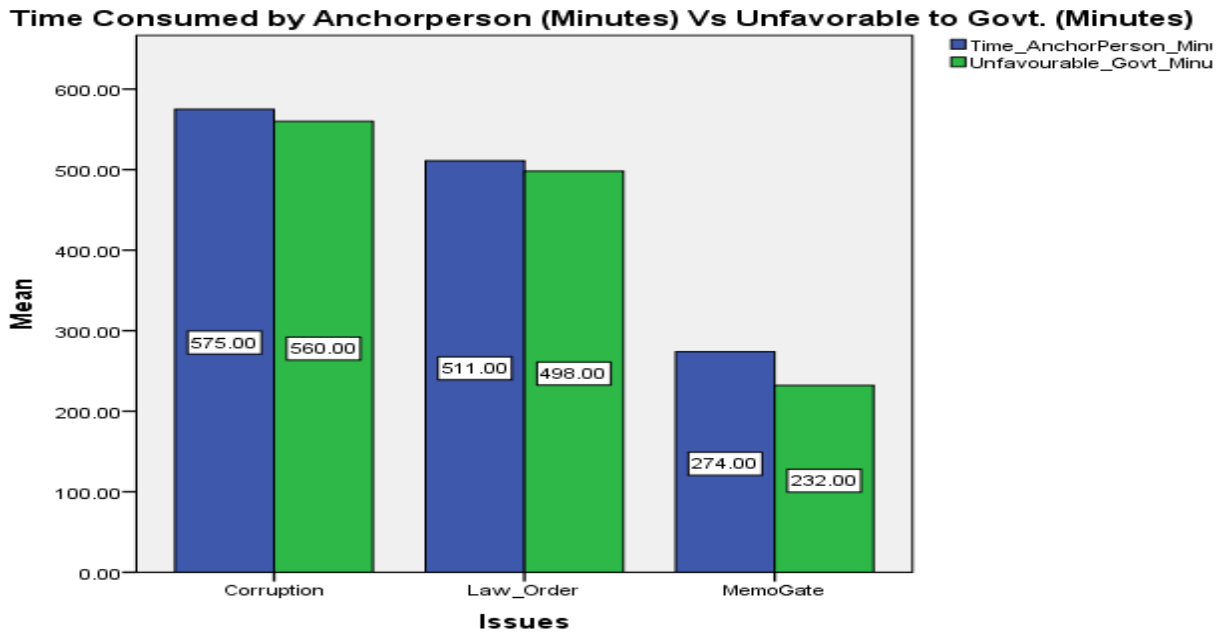
Method

Private Cable news channels was the population of this research study and the researcher selected leading and mostly watched news channel, Geo News for one year from 1st Oct 2011 to 30 Sep 2012 for sampling purposes. According to Gallup (2013) in a nationwide survey, Geo News was mostly watched cable news channel in Pakistan.

By using systematic method, three days (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) of every week were selected for news talk show for sample. Prime time talk show 'Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath' was used as a sample. Altogether, 156 (52x3) talk shows were selected for one year. The time consumed by anchorpersons and experts was calculated to check the role of anchorperson in setting the direction of slant on the issues of corruption, law and order and memo gate towards government. Slant for the issues was analyzed in terms of favorable and neutral towards government.

The paragraphs of these talk shows while a news story in talk shows were the coding unit analysis. News stories and paragraphs were counted in terms of favorable and unfavorable in terms of amount of time allotted to the each paragraph. For example the paragraph against Mr. Haqqani (one of the accused in memo gate case) was taken as unfavorable while the paragraph was neutral to Mr. Haqqani was considered as neutral to govt. Therefore, in this pattern the number and amount of time of the paragraphs was measured to check its slant.

Results and Analysis



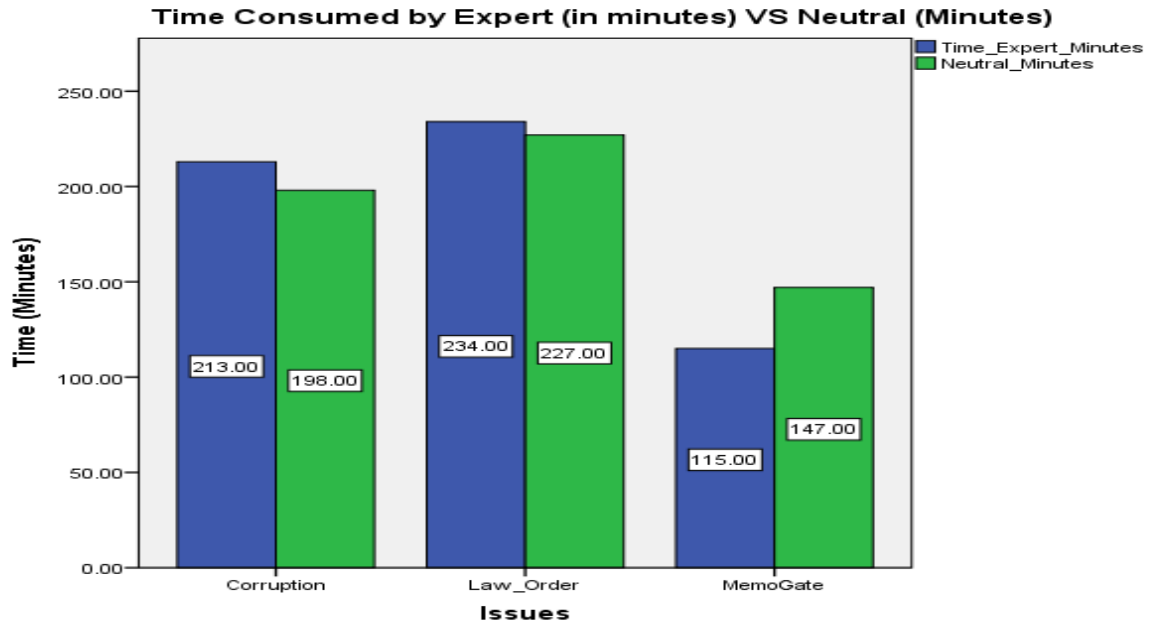
Graph 1 (Time Distribution Between Anchorpersons and Experts with Slants)

The above table shows that anchorpersons of Geo News’ talk shows grabbed more than 71 percent of its whole time on the issues of corruption, law and order and memo gate. The graph 1, depicts those experts or guests’ participants of the news talk shows have been able to get 29 percent time of the total time. The total time to these issues comes to 1922 minutes during the whole study period. 562 minutes were given to the experts while 1360 minutes grabbed by anchorpersons of ‘Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath’.

Moving towards unfavorable slant, it looks greatly significant as shown in the above graph 1. Anchorpersons were remained dominant in slanting the issues in a certain direction as there has been a perfect correspondence between slant and time consumed by anchorpersons. Out of total used time (71 Percent) by anchors, 67 percent coverage was

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remained in an unfavorable state while less 3 percent was remained favorable towards government as shown in the graph above.



Graph 2 Time consumed by Anchorpersons and Experts Vs Neutral

Graph 2 above shows that the experts of the programs have been utilized 29 percent time of the shows while 71 percent time grabbed by anchors. Interestingly, the tone and slant on the programs has greatly corresponded with the time consumed by experts.

It has been observed during analysis of the shows, anchorpersons on these channels are eager to contribute personal opinion on any under debate issue in the talk shows rather than giving free hand to the expert to speak about. On one channel the anchorperson of the channel is appeared as a host of a talk show while the same anchorperson may be seen as an expert on some other channel regardless of the expertise on the issue. It is noted that newscasters, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters have

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the tendency to set the agenda on the issues with great enthusiasm and force, though its not conscious all the time.

By doing this, anchorpersons can play an imperative role in making public opinion on a desired direction to fulfil the agenda, however, it is an interesting area to research whether anchor does this to fulfil the media outlet agenda or otherwise. The media outlets and anchors have tendency to call those experts or guests of their talk shows who have similar posture and viewpoint towards the channel. The results show that on one hand the anchorpersons grabbed a huge portion of their shows and on the other hand these have been vulnerable to government. The results have been supported and correlated with the H1 of the study. The anchorpersons generally do discuss issues without homework and there have been always shortcomings of verified facts and figures therefore in this way they try to transfer media salience through exaggerating the story or manipulating the facts and figures in favor of a certain party or group. Many anchorpersons are attached with some newspapers under cross media ownership arrangements. They usually, contribute columns to some national newspapers and since the columns are purely a personalized experience and writer can be less objective and impartial and can enjoy leniency. However, talk show is an interaction between different political parties and groups while the prime duty of the host is to facilitate the audiences by giving useful and concise input for meaningful end. H2 and H3 got support from the results of the study.

The results shown a positive correspondence between the time consumed by anchorpersons and the slant given to the issues. Moreover, it has also been examined that Geo News have the tendency to invite those guests or experts for ‘Aaj Kamran Khan Kay

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Saath' who are more consistent with the policy line of the media outlet. In a normal practice and pattern of a political talk show, anchorperson does facilitate and remain impartial and unbiased to explore some new ideas, opinion and recommendations from the guests. It has been noticed during the analysis that anchorpersons of the programs remained more eager to give recommendations rather inviting the experts for the same. Although, this trend has been penetrating in all the newly established channels in the country but it depends on the style, attitude and ethical approach of the anchorpersons as well. Anchorpersons on private news channels apparently do not follow ethical and moral bindings. They are used to pamper themselves for arguments on controversial political, religious and social issues. Anchorpersons do try to impose their own or media organization's ideology in a bureaucratic way. They are used to enforce and inculcate the audiences with their own philosophies that undermine the objective journalism.

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