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<b>Article:</b>	<b>Influence of Cross Media Ownership on Freedom of Expression in Pakistan</b>
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### **Abstract**

The growing trend of cross media ownership is one of the factors that influences media to carry out its public role properly. This study analyzed the influence of cross media ownership on freedom of expression, using propaganda model as a framework to explain journalistic practices. Anecdotal evidence suggests media freedom in Pakistan is under the threat of emerging cross media ownership structures that give priority to political and commercial interests. Using qualitative research technique followed by in-depth interviews method of editors of two leading newspapers and news channels belonging to two media conglomerates, for data collection purpose. This study concludes that cross media ownership didn't promote diversity of news and media convergence is profit oriented rather than objectivity oriented.

The results revealed that content homogeneity, set policy and agenda of media outlet and allocation of subsidies and therefore, cross media ownership influence freedom of expression in Pakistan.

**Key Words:** Media ownership, Propaganda Model, media freedom, Journalistic Practices

## 1. Introduction

Considerations about media values have been declining away in the age of technological revolutions, great increase in number of communication channels and consumer choices (Porto, 2005). This study will analyze influence of cross media ownership on freedom of expression in Pakistan. A strong, proactive and independent and free media can play a vibrant role in development of democratic process in any country. Bagdikian, (1997) emphasizes that editors gain freedom when they detach themselves from their preconceptions, biases, prejudgments and external influence. Mass media performs various important functions, linking various segments of society and provides avenues of socialization. The mass media acts as a significant social mirror which reflects political, social, economic agenda and shapes public opinion about various issues. The study identified how cross media ownership is having influence on freedom of expression. This qualitative study followed by in-depth interview will lead towards exploring the viewpoints of the editors of two media outlets that is Independent Media Corporation and Express group.

### 1.1 Background of Study

Over the past few decades, press freedom is experiencing an alarming downward spiral globally. The major reason of this worrying state of press freedom is attributed to media ownership patterns which forced journalists to compromise on professional norms. The most dangerous ownership model is cross media ownership, in which vertically organized conglomerates having no principled commitment to media professionalism and considers it as only profit-generating part of a broad enterprise.

### 1.2 Cross Media Ownership in Pakistan

The development of press system in Pakistan has been highly complicated, with impediments over the years from unconstitutional restrictions on freedom of press and strict military censorship. Until the early 1990s, there were no independent media channels and in 2002, it was Gen. Musharraf who had started issuing licenses of TV channels and FM Radio to newspaper companies in order to tame their editorial policies and make them toe a dictator's policy line on major national issues such as democracy, "war on terrorism" and insurgency in Baluchistan etc. For example, the Jang and Express groups made a number of visible changes in their editorial policies when they got their TV and FM radio licenses. This tool has provided an instrument of control to the government in Pakistan.

### 1.3 Rationale

Media is the most potent tool for the formation of public opinion in present-day times, it is the television, the press, the radio and the Internet. (Hadeshian, 2006). Role of media in society is very strong and media can play a watchdog role, when there is freedom of expression.

Pakistan is ranked 159 out of 180 countries in ranking for media freedom, in perspective of Media Watchdog Reporters without Borders. The same group had placed Pakistan at 158 last year in its annual report. Universal freedom of expression and free media access always ensure democracy in any state. (SIDA, 2005). Diversity of media is important for ensuring pluralism of opinion, citizen's participation in democratic society and adequate political representation (Caraus, 2004). Media concentration has negative impact on diversity of content and opinion. The main purpose of this study is to determine the influence of cross media ownership on freedom of expression and diversity in leading newspapers of Pakistan. Freedom of expression and diversity will lead towards healthy media environment. This qualitative study followed by in-depth interview will lead towards exploring the viewpoints of the editors of two media outlets that is Independent Media Corporation and Express group. This research will identify how cross media ownership is having

influence on freedom of expression. Hence, media owners should be vigilant of this growing trend of cross media ownership and its drawback for media environment.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study include:

1. To determine the influence of cross media ownership factor on freedom of expression of leading print media outlets that is Independent Media Corporation and Express group.
2. To determine the political and economic interests and affiliations of the media owners that affect freedom of expression in Pakistan.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Conceptual Framework**

The controversy of cross-media ownership has been well debated globally. From both theoretical and policy perspectives, the impact on cross media ownership on media professionalism has attracted a great amount of attention in communication research. Many scholars have studied the case of media professionalism to media ownership.

Park (2021), analyzed that Cross ownership of television and newspapers had a same slant while covering political ideology and suggest that it is misleading to assume that cross ownership confirms viewpoint diversity. Altschul (1984) contends that “the content of the press is directly correlated with the interest of those who finance the press”.

Drunen (2021), analyzed that understanding of the editorial independence and its policy functions face challenges in newsroom. Further the ways in which journalist and editors have expectations from policy to provide the settings for editorial independence are also challenged.

Öztunc & Pierre (2021), analyzed that in few countries the freedom of expression is guaranteed by constitution but the media struggling to sustain an editorial independence. Concentration of media ownership has played a great role in undermining editorial independence (Hart, 2008). Cross media ownership is reducing the cost because of the sharing of staff and content between outlets. . (Edge, 2009). According to a Survey conducted by Roy Morgan survey in 2006, journalists are influenced by economic and political interests of their employers. More than 37% media workers had been directed to “toe the commercial line” and take into consideration their employer’s political ambitions.

Many media analysts and researchers have focused their attention on harmful effects of media consolidation, including abuse of political power by media proprietors or marginalization of some points of view. Mara Einstein (2004), asserts that the more concentrated the media industry, the more the shrinking of diverse public opinions across media avenues. Indeed, communication scholars denounce the control of the media in few hands and under representation of certain viewpoints. The cross media ownership will lead to more concentration of media and this will result in less diversity (Papandrea, 2006).

Media regulatory bodies in countries like Pakistan are used as a tool by the government to have influence on media, and the growth of diverse media is not possible. (Rasul & Profitt, 2013)

Chomsky (2002) opines that there is no conspiracy theory needed to investigate how media ownership interferes with editorial policies. He argues that it is not possible for any government to stay in power without support of media owners who protects vested interests of incumbent government and also exploit politicians to achieve their commercial goals.

Media owners are closely associated with, the interests of, the economic and political establishment (Lai, 2007). Variety of sources, content, and organizations is essential for the proper

functioning of a strong media sphere in Pakistan, which would then encourage diversity, and freedom of expression, deliberative democracy in the country (McDowell & Rasul,2012).

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

The present study on Cross Media Ownership and its influence on editorial independence and journalistic practices will be undertaken within the theoretical framework of Propaganda Model by Chomsky and Herman (2002). In current theoretical and empirical studies of media, uses of the propaganda model is to give understanding into the workings of political and economic power in society (Broudy Carañana & Klaehn,2018).

In the Propaganda Model, Chomsky and Herman (2002) , assert that the mass media has reduced itself into government and corporate mouthpiece and no longer serves its fourth estate role. Pedro (2011), analyzed that propaganda model is effective and comprehensive in explaining the news production in the context of power relations. He further analyzed that , in the current era of media commercialization, concentration, and subservience, the model has been used by various authors, both for theoretical reflection, and for this methodological instrument.

Propaganda model is further endorsed by Shoemaker and Reese (1991), as they argue that media owners have ultimate authority over news content and they are less likely to emphasize on objectivity and newsworthiness and more interested in economic benefits. The two frameworks illustrate how the media owners are compromising on journalistic norms by interfering with editorial independence to serve those in political and economic powers and thus pose a great threat to freedom of expression and interest of general public. Zollmann (2017) showed propaganda established in news media content of liberal democracies. He analyzed, based on propaganda model that established structure of news media depends on groups and powerful elites to manage the news arena. According to the report of media ownership monitor, concentration of media ownership prevails in Pakistan and it is a big threat to freedom of expression and diversity. Information channels accessible to the public have increased i.e. country's print and electronic media (Voluntary national review,2019)

This raises the question that in the context of Pakistan, how concentration of media ownership or homogeneity is affecting freedom of expression and diversity and how political and economic factors affecting freedom of expression.

## **2.3 Research Questions**

**R.Q.1.**To what extent text homogeneity between print and electronic media effect freedom of expression.

**R.Q.2.** How do the political and economic interests and affiliations of the media owners affect freedom of expression in Pakistan?

## **4. Methodological design**

To study the influence of cross media ownership on freedom of expression, the core method of data collection in this study was in-depth interview. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves thorough individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their viewpoints on a particular idea, program, or situation. (Boyce & Neale, 2006)

In-depth interviews are beneficial when you want thorough information about a person's thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues in depth. (Boyce & Neale, 2006)

### **3.1 Detailed procedures**

Researcher identified two largest media groups with greatest number of media outlets and respective print and electronic media from these two largest media groups. Then the respective editors were approached to answer the queries. Subjects identified or interviewees for this study were the editors of these two media outlets that is Independent Media Corporation and Express group.

Researcher interviewed four respondents, two respondents from Express television news channel (Urdu) and, Daily Express Newspaper (Urdu), and other two from Independent Media Corporation, that is the Geo News channel and Daily Jang (The newspaper). Researcher interviewed editors of through voice recorders. Voice recording was transcribed and used for further analysis.

**3.2 Sampling:** Purposive sampling method is used in this study, and on the basis of these two largest media groups with greatest number of media outlets were selected. Researcher selected two news channels and two print media outlets from Independent Media Corporation and express group. Two mediums (One print and one electronic) from express group were part of this study that is Express television news channel (Urdu) and, Daily Express Newspaper (Urdu). Two mediums (One print and one electronic) from Independent Media Corporation were, Daily Jang (newspaper) and Geo News channel.

The main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be rationally assumed to be representative of the population. (Lavrakas, 2008).

To examine the influence of cross media ownership, four editors are selected, two from each print and electronic media channels.

**3.2.1 Express Group:** Two mediums (One print and one electronic) from express group will be part of this study that is Express television news channel (Urdu) and, Daily Express Newspaper (Urdu). Express News is an Urdu language Pakistani television news channel, it was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> January, and 2008. It is owned and run by the Daily Express Newspaper, which was founded in 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1998.

**3.2.2 Independent Media Corporation:** Two mediums (One print and one electronic) from Independent Media Corporation will be selected that is the Geo News channel and Daily Jang (The newspaper). The *Daily Jang* is published by the Jang Group of Newspapers. Jang Group of Newspapers is a subsidiary of the Independent Media Corporation. It is the oldest newspaper of Pakistan in continuous publication since its foundation in 1939. Geo Television established in May 2002 and owned by the Independent Media Corporation. The channel started test transmission on 14 August 2002, with regular transmission beginning 1 October 2002.

**3.3 Instrument:** The instrument to measure the freedom of expression is questionnaire, which is designed for in depth interview. Questionnaire for in-depth interview entails four indicators of freedom of expression (dependent variable) that is homogeneity of news, objectivity, pressure on editor and government regulations.

**3.4 Validity of Instrument:** Questionnaire is appropriate for in-depth interview as it is based on

- 1) Literature.
- 2) It is reviewed by subject expert.
- 3) A sample of possible interviewers examined the instrument for any inaccuracy.

## 4. Findings

**R.Q.1. To what extent text homogeneity between print and electronic media effect freedom of expression.**

The relationship of cross-media ownership with text homogeneity and freedom of expression is that when the media company own both the print media and electronic (cross media ownership), then there is great chance of homogeneity between the content of print and electronic media and this homogeneity or similarity have an influence on freedom of expression.

With reference to research question number one, majority of the respondents replied that there is centralized policy and the content between print and electronic is shared, therefore, cross media ownership of print and electronic media is going to affect freedom of expression. Cross media ownership is promoting homogeneity of news as majority of the respondents replied that there is mechanism of sharing of information in print and electronic media. That is, if reporter works in a beat he not only sends the news to the print media but also forward the news to the electronic media editors. Editor of Geo TV said that "*Gone are the days when there used to be separate reporters for radio, television and papers. A single person, single handedly, even with a cell phone, record, shoot and shift the tape script to the paper*". There was consensus among majority of the editors that media policy remains same and media groups with multiple channels and newspapers have the same policy top to bottom. Majority of the respondents replied that, "*cross media ownership didn't promote diversity of news stories in different mediums, and there is not much difference in the news being broadcast by different channels because of the same mechanism of gathering and dissemination of information*". Respondents were of view point that, media convergence is definitely profit oriented. The same team preparing a same content for different mediums which has given a clear benefit to the owner by decreasing the cost.

It has been concluded that cross media ownership is promoting homogeneity of content and this in turn is going to have an effect on freedom of expression. It was further found that cross media ownership didn't promote diversity of news stories in different mediums and this cross-media ownership is always profit oriented by effecting freedom of expression.

#### **R.Q.2. How do the political and economic interests and affiliations of the media owners affect freedom of expression in Pakistan?**

With reference to research question number two, owner's political and economic interest affect freedom of expression as majority of the respondents replied that cross media ownership is always profit oriented and in turn has affected freedom of expression. Regarding the cross-media ownerships effect on objectivity of editorial department, there were partial views as half of the respondents replied that cross media ownership is always profit oriented and half of the respondents replied that cross media ownership has not completely affected the objectivity of editorial dept.

There was common view among half of the respondents that there is pressure of owners on editorial dept. The owners are bound to take care of many things like how to get maximum commercials, they have to retain their political and personal affiliations. In such scenario they set an agenda and editorial is to follow that. This situation thus results into the absence of several facts as well as objectivity.

Majority of the respondents replied that, "*political and business interest influence editorial decision making of owners and in turn effect freedom to choose the content, hence effecting freedom of expression*".

Three of the respondents argued that definitely, owner of the group decides the agenda of the channel. Only one respondent was of the view point that reliance on organizations agenda will lead towards loss your readership and viewership gradually, if you shall not respect the public opinion and the mindset of the masses.

Majority of the respondents agreed that editors, reports, anchor persons have been pressurized by law enforcement officials and pressure group in the form of unknown calls, WhatsApp messages, messages on social media. One of the respondent emphasized that, “*communities, religions, races, classes, sects, economic upheavals, personal and political likes and dislikes, which narrative do you like, which background do you belong to, all are affecting it and it is a natural factor. You cannot omit it, though you can decrease / minimize it / deescalate it but you cannot uproot it*” There was response of the majority of the respondents that, none of the worker in government and private media institution is allowed to violate terms and conditions of institution, where you work in the name of freedom of expression.

Responding to the question either media is largely protected from government interference or not, most of the respondents replied that, “*state owned media portray the positive things of the government for their image building and government run media never act as a watch dog*”. Comparative to this, it is the private media that is the representative and shaper of public opinion. They further added that, “*freedom of expression is always challenged by the desire to make more and more money, to maximize the profit and job insecurity and none of the worker in government and private institution is allowed to violate terms and conditions of institution, where you are working in the name of freedom of expression*”.

It has been concluded that owner’s political and economic interest affects freedom of expression as majority of the respondents replied that cross media ownership is always profit oriented and in turn has affected freedom of expression. Majority of the respondents agreed that editors, reporters, anchor persons have been pressurized by law enforcement officials and pressure groups.

There was response of the majority of the respondents that, none of the workers in government and private media institutions is allowed to violate terms and conditions of institution, where you work in the name of freedom of expression

## **Discussion**

Cross media ownership is promoting homogeneity of news as majority of the respondents replied that there is mechanism of sharing of information in print and electronic media. Similarity of content or homogenization is increased within chain ownership and it has impact in terms of promoting restrictions on press freedom. (Baum & Zhukov, 2018). Hence, it is proved that, if cross media ownership is promoting homogeneity than it is going to affect freedom of expression. It has been analyzed that cross media ownership is promoting homogeneity.

Majority of the respondents replied that cross media ownership didn’t promote diversity of news and this in synchronization to the previous literature. Shaukat (2013), analyzed that cross media ownership reduces the diversity in news stories content owned by single media group.

Most of the respondents replied that cross media ownership didn’t promote diversity of news stories in different mediums, and there is not much difference in the news being broadcast by different channels because of the same mechanism of gathering and dissemination of information. Respondents were of view point that, media convergence is definitely profit oriented. The same team preparing a same content for different mediums which has given a clear benefit to the owner by decreasing the cost. Objectivity, which is another of the indicator of freedom of expression in Pakistan. It has been analyzed that media owner’s political and economic interests is affecting objectivity, as half of the respondents agreed to the notion that cross media ownerships effect on objectivity of editorial department.

Half of the respondents agreed to the notion that cross media ownerships effect on objectivity of editorial department and half of the respondents were not agreed.

Therefore, regarding the cross media ownership's effect on objectivity of editorial department, there were partial views as half of the respondents replied that cross media ownership is always profit oriented and half of the respondents replied that cross media ownership has not completely effected the objectivity of editorial dept.

Another indicator of freedom of expression that is pressure on editor. Therefore, while analyzing pressure on editor in terms of defined media policies, three of the respondents argued that definitely, owner of the group decides the agenda of the channel. They have to withdraw from all those news which are against the set policy and agenda of Newspaper. This concept is similar to the previous research findings. As, Wojtkowski (2010) analyzed that, the threat to the freedom of speech is the process of establishing the media agenda.

Majority of the respondents were agreed that editors, reports, anchor persons have been pressurized by law enforcement officials and pressure group in the form of unknown calls, WhatsApp messages, messages on social media. Respondents were agreed on the opinion that, while deciding on news stories objectivity of the content is often risk because of religious affiliation, political and personal affiliations. Previous literature also holds the opinion that cross media ownership are associated with owners influence on media outlets. (Hanretty, 2014)

Final indicator of freedom of expression that is government regulation, while responding to the question either media is largely protected from government interference or not, majority of the respondents replied that government run media portray the positive things of the government for their image building and government run media never act as a watch dog.

Previous literature also focused on the concept relationship between government run media and government have a strong relationship in terms of economic ties. Akhtar & Pratt, (2016) analyzed the relationships between the government and media in Pakistan through a survey of 357 Pakistani journalists and it was found that economic concerns are the principal focus of government and media relationships.

Comparative to this, few of the respondents are of view that, it is the private media that is the representative and shaper of public opinion. Regarding the control on media through allocation of subsidies, half of the respondents replied that, it has been happening in all ages. If media is cracking stories against the government, the government shall take measures to control media. There are separate devices to control true stories that may range from advertisements management to many others. This is similar to the findings of Akhtar & Pratt, (2016), they analyzed that private news media are often pressured by the government through, regulations, laws, taxes and licenses, hence leading to oppositional relationships between the news media and the government.

## **Conclusion**

It has been proved that, cross media ownership promoting homogeneity and it is going to affect freedom of expression. It has been concluded that cross media ownership didn't promote diversity of news and media convergence is profit oriented rather than promoting objectivity. There was consensus among the respondents that cross media ownership's effect on objectivity of editorial department. It was further analyzed that owner of the media group decide the agenda of the channel. They have to withdraw from all those news which are against the set policy and agenda of media outlet.

Regarding the control on media through allocation of subsidies, it has been found that trend of subsidies prevailed in all ages. If media is cracking stories against the government, the government shall take measures to control media. It is further concluded that, government run media portray the positive things of the government. Therefore, the political (*government run media*) and economic (*allocation of subsidies & advertisements*) interests and affiliations of the media owners

affect freedom of expression in Pakistan. This research concluded that content homogeneity, set policy and agenda of media outlet and allocation of subsidies and therefore, cross media ownership influence freedom of expression in Pakistan.

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