

Corporate Influence on Pakistani News Media: Journalists' Perception

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Abstract

News making process is complex and there are several factors that may influence it. The power of corporate sector to influence media policies and content is one of them. Journalists play pivotal role in news making process. The study, through survey aims to investigate the perceptions of the journalists for the possible influence of corporate sector through advertising and public relations, on news media in Pakistan. A sample of 250 journalists was selected randomly from major cities of Pakistan. Findings show that journalists believe that corporations through advertising and public relations influence news media corporations both at a macro and micro level however, this influence is exerted on the journalists not directly but through the ownership policies.

Keywords: *Political economy, Corporate sector, Advertising, News media content*

Introduction

The editorial policy or to say the media content production policy is considered important when it comes to assessing the role of media in any society. The question that has perplexed the academia and media industry professionals is the determination of those elements that may affect the policy decisions on media content production i.e. who has any influence on media content production? There are several factors that play a role in content production i.e. owners ideology, corporate/advertising influence, gatekeepers, government influence and source influence (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The respective effect of these factors

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along with the direction of influence has always remained an area of interest for the researchers.

Media and corporate sector nexus has remained an important area of research and scholarship in the community of scholars in media studies. Herman and Chomsky (1988) declared advertising as an important filter for news media because of dependency of media economy on it. Media contents are strategized, conceived and produced to serve the corporate sector/advertisers, 'media compete for their patronage, developing specialized staff to solicit advertisers and necessarily having to explain how their programs serve advertisers' need' (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The debate on political economy of communication and media draws our attention toward the role played by advertising in media. Corporate sector influence affects media content and creates serious inequalities in production process, in content and also in the consumption patterns. This process creates consequences for public discourse. The audience turns into a commodity for the advertising exchange, 'within the system, the audiences themselves are commodity. The economics of commercial broadcasting revolves around the exchange of audience for advertising revenue' (Golding and Murdock, 2000, p. 20).

Therefore, the investigation of the ways by which media and corporate/advertising sector nexus could affect the content and consequently national debates on various public issues is considered an important area of research in mass communication field, 'it allows us to trace the detailed connections between financing and organizations of cultural products and exchanges in the field of public discourses and presentation' (Golding and

Murdock, 2000, p. 20).

Normative perspectives on media theory discuss the social dividend that can be delivered when idea of free press or libertarianism is applied in a society and how that dividend can be stolen by the corporate sector interests when they affect the media messages and its carriers i.e. newspapers and TV channels (McQuail, 2003). Baran and Davis (2012) argues, 'but what if advertiser's support permits bad messages to be distributed for free' (p. 106). The social responsibility perspective of normative media theory seems an important attempt to regulate the influence of advertisers/corporate sector on media content (McQuail, 2010). News making process is complex and its final product is an outcome of combined efforts of many professionals. In that process journalists working as reporters and subeditors play the most important role. The staff working at higher hierarchy mostly acts as gate keeper, but the reporters and copy editors work more closely in a knitted way to produce news. News gives us shared reality by the virtue of the work of journalists (Carey, 1989). It is argued that human perception guides the actions (Halász and Cunnington, 2012).

Pakistan has witnessed a massive growth in media during the last decade. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2017) total number of newspapers and periodicals in Pakistan are 539, and according to media commission report PEMRA has issued 89 TV channels licenses (2013). This media surge has affected all sectors of life and there is no exception to its influence.

On 3rd July 2013, a media commission appointed by Supreme Court of Pakistan submitted its report to the Court. Members of the

commission Mr. Javed Jabbar and Justice (R) Nasir Aslam Zahid highlighted the various patterns of practices in Pakistani media. They also discussed the influence of various elements on media content, and advertising was one of them. Media Commission report states, 'advertisers virtually dictate the prime-time content preferences' (p. 11). Ali and Khalid (2012) discussed notion of freedom of press and the variety of elements in Pakistani media that tend to hinder free flow of information to the masses.

There is a body of literature available that advances our understanding regarding the influence of these factors on the media content production, but when it comes to Pakistani media, the literature is silent and corporate influence on Pakistani media is nothing but a guess work. The long-standing debate to assess the role of corporate sector on media by different stakeholders mostly lacks research findings. The corporate influence on media can be assessed by variety of ways and assessing the journalists' perception for the influence that corporate sector exercise on news media through public relations and advertising is one of them. Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) found that journalist's perception about the possible influencing factors affect their performances and organizational outputs. Their findings show that political and economic factors as the two most important determinants perceived by journalist that influence their work.

Keeping in consideration the media growth in Pakistan and debates on corporate sector influence on media content, the present study initiates an investigation into this area to gather empirical evidence to understand relationship of journalists, news contents and corporate sector. The perception of journalists will help to

understand the dynamics of possible impact that is created by corporate sector on Pakistani news media.

Theoretical Framework

Murdock and Golding (2000) define Critical Political Economy (CPE) as a holistic and historical approach that describes a balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention. It also deals with basic moral questions of justice, equity and public good. In the realm of media CPE provides a lens to investigate three major processes in media i.e. content production, content itself and content consumption. CPE aspect that deals with content production is selected to understand the effect of corporate influence on news media in Pakistan through journalists' perception. News making is a process where contesting ideologies try to find their place in the final media output. Journalists make decisions on the selection of angle, choices of words and phrases, and accommodation of viewpoints of different stakeholders involved with news stories. Those factors that journalist perceive affect their work also affect the final news output. Among these factors economic factors in the form of corporate influence exercised through public relations and advertising are the most significant.

Literature Review

Media, the Fourth Pillar of the state has been considered as panacea for the sound establishment of democracy and smooth working of society (Dutta, 2011). Media is believed as an agent for the audiences, as it selects the most important events and is expected to deliver them truthfully (Sutter, 2002). Despite of all the debates erupted at scholastic forums regarding the tendency of media in prevailing sensationalism, immorality and superficiality, its

significant role in the functionality of the society and its institutions is still entrenched (Coronel, 2001). However, whatever are the expectations associated with role of media, the fact is, most of the time, media does not live up to the ideal. Besides state censorship and ownership monopoly, some other factors also act as a constraint in the functionality of the media (Coronel, 2001). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have proposed the hierarchical model of media influence, which is divided into five levels including individual, routines, organizational, extra media (institutional), and ideological (socio cultural). These levels depict how the media contents may be influenced on different levels, ranging from micro to macro, from pressures present within and outside of news organizations. There are several extra media factors that influence media which include corporate sector/advertisers, public relations efforts, government and political forces, and interest groups. This study has focused on corporate sector/advertisers. This section explores how different studies have articulated the encounter of media functionality and advertisements.

Advertisements play a pivotal role in the funding of media (Ellman and Germano, 2009). This has raised many questions on the influence of advertisements on editorial content, media biases and as a pressure on journalists and media. Evans (2009) also highlights similar corporate oriented purpose of media as he states that society needs to be rational in choosing the media. Choosing a particular magazine, newspaper, TV channel and other media is in fact putting your eyeballs for an aggregation that will be then sold to advertisers.

The political economy scholarship of the media (Herman and

Chomsky 1988; Mosco 1996; Herman and McChesney 1997) has also highlighted how the political economic factors of media cast negative impact on media as media creates a distance from its core duties. Critics of political and economic biases in media debate the ways by which interests of advertisers in free enterprise system could be safeguarded so they may affect the content of the delivered messages. Media critique of corporate sector can agitate government regulations, higher corporate taxes and public ownership of corporations. Therefore, to hinder such situation large business corporations devise the strategies to create desired effects on media content that might be resulted into the biases in media content (Sutter, 2002).

Parenti (1986) describes this situation as a consistent most of the times. He argues that capitalistic perspective dominates everywhere and every time; and it rarely happens that the situation diverges from that. In media, it is a system of control that is prevalent. The dynamics of this influence are not in terms of absolute control rather at times it can be discomforting to the rich and powerful as well.

As advertisers are aware of the fact that media is dependent upon advertisement for the generation of revenue, so they assume to have right access to the news content (Bagdikian, 1997). A number of studies have proved how media content is being affected by the advertisers. Masterson (1992) found that more than 89% of the 150 newspaper editors surveyed gave opinion that advertisers pulled ads when they thought the newspapers were not supporting their agenda or advertisers tried to influence news stories. Falling in line to this study, Hays and Reisner (1990) conducted survey of

farm magazine journalists and the result concluded that 62% of the surveyed journalists said that they received threat of advertising withdrawal from advertisers displeased by the magazine copy; whereas 48% responded that advertisers actually withdrew advertising from the publication.

Media and advertiser relationship, commercial broadcast houses have largely become the extensions of the large corporations, so it is seen that their news contents are under business influence (Upshaw and Chernoc, 2007) and they are reported to present distorted information to the audiences (Petrove, 2011). In such a situation, Bagdikian (1990) argues that the audiences are gathered not to inform, but to be sold to the advertiser. They overlooked the viewer-broadcaster relationship by implicitly diluting the news coverage with commercial message (Upshaw, Chernoc and Koranda, 2007). So, mostly journalistic efforts and business techniques are seen as in a state of cross-purposes in broadcast news (McManus, 1994).

In this context, a rise in commercialization of news is causing a death of investigative journalism. It has put both media freedom and pluralism in jeopardy. The silencing of critical journalism is commonly achieved through ownership and economic pressure (Stetke, 2012). This does not only defect the actual role of news, but also dismounts the credibility of news. Such acts of diluting news coverage can be regarded as deceptive as commercial messages seep into traditional news space and they occupy space primarily meant to be devoted to the real journalism (Upshaw, Chernoc and Koranda, 2007). Hence, it can be regarded that media serves the interests of advertisers instead of audiences (Parenti, 1986).

Upshaw & Chernoc (2007) describe four ways of diluting news coverage with commercial message: stealthy advertising is a way of attaining promotional tone and singling out single product in news coverage; product placement, in which products of the brands are placed within the news stories; sponsored segments in a newscast display the name of company or its logo and lastly; in news framing of business, news stories are presented in a way that they boost the image of the company, mainly advertisers.

Besides depicting pro-business content and depiction in media, many scholars have also argued that stories or programs are killed due to pressure from or fear of the offended advertiser (Bagdikian, 1997). This is called as agenda cutting (Colistra, 2008). This agenda cutting phenomenon in media has been studied in many studies. A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism surveyed local television news directors and results yielded that 30% of the respondents were of the opinion that they have faced to alter the stories as desired by advertisers; it includes either killing the story that may make advertisers angry or doing the news stories to project positive image of advertisers.

As per the question that how many times journalists have to face this pressure, different studies have yielded different answers to this question. For instance, in a survey conducted by American Society of Newspaper Editors, 21% of the respondents said that they never experienced any pressure from advertisers, 6% said that they experienced pressure less than once a year. Whereas, 26% said that they had to face advertiser pressure once or twice a year, 20% said several times a year and 11% said about once a month. Other 6% responded that they had to face pressure two to three times a

month, 6% said nearly every week and 3% said that several times a week.

In another survey, including 147 editors, conducted by Soley and Craig (1992), 90% responded that they have experienced advertiser pressure due to the content of the news story. Over half of the editors said that they were pressured to write stories to please advertisers, while more than a third said that advertisers successfully influenced the newspapers content and 90% agreed that advertisers withdrew advertising due to editorial content. These surveys support the fact that advertisers do influence media content by forcing journalists to change, mold or altogether kill conflicting content.

However, some scholars have also analyzed that media loyalties are not consistent and they are intended to shift. It means that influencing actors keep on changing as dynamics of corporate sector, media industry environment and business trends change (Ornerbring, 2012). Baker (1997) in its study asserted three criteria of defining tilt of the loyalty: first, the larger purchaser; second, the purchaser with the most knowledge as to how the media can serve its needs; third, the purchaser most sensitive to how the media can affects its interests. Whatever is the case, the fact is that it is advertiser that matter and not the audiences.

Journalists have been using several techniques to avert the influence of internal and external factors tending to affect their professional ethics (Voakes, 2009). Social media has proved itself as a platform that can be used by professional journalists to express their views that otherwise they could not express. Journalists are using various internet platforms for that purpose including blogs,

facebook, twitter and others (Meraz, 2009).

Methodology

A survey of media practitioners of newspaper and television from three major cities of Pakistan that is Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad was conducted. A sample of 250 media practitioners through stratified random sampling was selected from the population. One hundred respondents from Lahore, one hundred from Karachi and fifty from Islamabad were selected. An instrument comprising of forty items has been designed. Which include key variables: Agenda setting power of advertisers; Advertisers overall influence on media organizations; Advertisers influence on individual journalist; Corporate PR empowered journalists. The instrument used was at Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

Hypotheses

- H1.** Journalists believe that advertisers have agenda setting power over news media in Pakistan.
- H2.** Journalists believe that media organizations where they work are influenced by advertisers.
- H3.** Journalists believe that as an individual news media worker they are influenced by advertisers while performing their duties for the news media in Pakistan.
- H4.** Journalists believe that as compared to direct advertising revenue corporate public relations is an effective tool to influence news media in Pakistan.
- H5.** Journalists believe that perception of an absolute influence of corporate sector on Pakistani news media is a myth.

Findings and Discussion

For the reliability of items Cronbach's Alpha was applied that generated the value of 0.731. For the null hypotheses H1₀, H2₀, H3₀, H4₀, H5₀ one sample t-test (one-tail) was applied that generated following results;

Table 1: One sample t-test (one tail) table

Variable	t-value (one tail)	p-value	Remarks
1. Agenda setting power of advertisers	2.601	0.005	Significant
2. Advertisers overall influence on media organizations	2.780	0.003	Significant
3. Advertisers influence on individual Journalist	3.892	0.000	Significant
4. Corporate PR effectiveness on News	5.094	0.000	Significant
5. Myth of absolute corporate influence	2.178	.015	Significant

For the variables agenda setting power of advertisers, advertisers overall influence on media organizations, advertisers influence on individual journalist, corporate PR effectiveness on news and myth of absolute corporate influence obtained p-values are $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.05$ respectively. Hence hypotheses H1₀, H2₀, H3₀, H4₀ and H5₀ are rejected. Therefore, corresponding research hypotheses are corroborated.

Findings show that journalists believe that news media content is influenced by corporations that exert pressure by the tactics of advertising, public relations and other corporate communication strategies. This influence works from top to bottom. In Pakistan, most of the media organizations are owned and managed by individuals. Those individuals enjoy almost absolute power over the staff, functions and content of media organizations. Media owners then pass on their agendas to the editors who pass those

agendas to lower hierarchy including reporters, subeditors etc. Journalists are of the view that corporations do not try to influence the individual journalists directly. They make their deals and bargain their interests with the owners and management at the top.

Corporate sector implies various tools to influence media organizations. Among these tools public relations and advertising are considered the most effective. Journalists agree that in Pakistani news culture public relations strategies by corporations are always more effective in establishing long term relations than other corporate tools. Advertising appears to be a cold attitude as compared to public relations. PR helps in developing a closer and more cordial relationship with senior leadership of news media that in the long run always proves to be an important asset for them. Effective public relations also help as a crisis management strategy for news media organizations because most of the corporate leaders have close partnership with political leadership of the country.

It is generally believed that corporations exercise their influence on media organization in a manner that they undermine the journalist's agency as a media professional to resist the pressure and take any independent decision in news making process. Responding to this myth of corporate influence journalists agree corporate pressure exists for the purpose of influencing overall editorial policy of news media organizations, but journalist can exercise their agency to act independently in making the decisions for news production process. Journalists are of the view that corporation influence is real and it exists at every level and all the time, but not in absolute terms.

Conclusion

Political economy theory of the media discusses the aspect of media behavior in detail and highlights that media production process as a contestation of ideologies where advertising and other revenue means play an important role in making final decisions regarding the media content to be printed or broadcasted. Media organizations in Pakistan are under the influence of corporations that make investments by giving advertisements to the media. In return, corporate sector demands favorable coverage, persuasion of their agenda and a positive image boosting by media organizations. These demands can only be met via working journalists. These demands can make journalists to compromise on ethical principles of their work. In that scenario journalists have to find refuge. That is why many journalists find mainstream media an influenced domain by corporate sector and they believe that social media is a shield for them to remain safe from unethical journalism practices.

Findings of the study are consistent with literature available and general observation of the conduct of media in Pakistan and around the globe. It is found that advertising sector enjoys great influence on the media and influences the media organization at both macro and micro level. It is a universal phenomenon for the conduct of media in the world that media organization shape up their content to get favorable attitude from advertisers. This is true in case of TV when the purpose is to get the more ratings to have maximum share of advertising revenue and similarly in the case of newspapers to have more advertising.

Most of the media organizations are owned and managed by individuals and interestingly those individuals do not belong to

journalism rather they are corporate sector people who have initiated media ventures either to safeguard their corporate interests or to advance their political ambitions. Moreover, editors also enjoy power in news media organizations; therefore, strategic public relations approaches adopted by corporate sector to influence media organizations are more helpful for media management than other available options. Pakistani culture also makes public relations to work more effectively because of elements of courtesy and generosity that are deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric of Pakistani society. Findings have also indicated that rather than affecting directly, the public relations techniques that work in a tacit way to affect the news media contents are more effective. In Pakistan media ownership patterns as well as editorial control facilitate public relations techniques to work effectively and create a long-term impact on content of news media.

It is concluded that journalists believe that corporate sector has an ability to influence news media in Pakistan for agenda setting and consequently affecting the public discourse. The findings are consistent with the position of theory of political economy that advances argument that corporate sector influences the media at organizational as well as at individual level. However, journalists believe that an absolute influence of corporate sector on the news media is there but is not as strong as it is generally perceived. Journalists are influenced by corporate sector tools including public relations and advertising but their agency to act independently is not completely undermined.

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