



Studying Press Biasness in Coverage of Saudi-Iran Conflict:

A Case of Pakistani Press

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Abstract

This study was aimed to investigate the coverage patterns of leading Pakistani newspapers regarding Saudi-Iran conflict in the light of framing, agenda setting theory. Four leading and most widely circulated Urdu and English newspapers were taken for the content analysis. These newspapers were selected to measure the variables, frequency, themes, frames and slant. The results show that the leading newspapers provided a variety of frames to communicate comprehensive coverage to the Saudi-Iran conflict. No significant difference was found in the coverage patterns of Urdu and English newspaper. In terms of themes and frames these newspapers highlighted a wider range of topics regarding Saudi-Iran conflict.

Keyword: *Conflict, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Mediation, Press Biasness*

Introduction

This study explores the coverage patterns given to the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran by the leading Pakistani newspapers. History reveals that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is full of ups and downs and there has been a possible danger of a major clash between both countries during the last few decades. Many factors have been involved in the tense state of affairs. Both countries have great differences in in this particular kind of advertisement to promote the products and services. Many issues including the interpretations of Islam,

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policy for exportation of the oil and having relationship with the western countries etc. Despite these differences both countries have desire to lead the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia and Iran are Muslim majority nations and follow the rule of Holy Quran but with differences in faith and explanations of the Islamic commandments. Iran is a Shia Islamic Republic and emerges as an anti-western nation while on the other hand; Saudi Arabia is a Sunni Islamic Kingdom with a close ties with the Unites States and the other developed nations.

At many occasions Iran criticized Saudi Arabia for its Pro-West policies while Saudi Arabia has serious concern that Iran's basic desire is to export its revolution in the whole Persian Gulf Countries. The tense relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran increased as a result of Iran's subversion of the Arabian governments, especially Gulf governments that have a great number of Shiite minorities in their populations (Abir, 1997). Saudi Arabia is a strong ally with the West in contradiction to Iran's foreign policy which views the West as the greatest enemy (Terrill, 2011). To understand this unresolved phenomenon it is imperative to observe the important events to understand the background of the conflict.

The Iraq Issue

Several external factors ever remained the cause of strained relationship. One of these was Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iraq. The war between Iran and Iraq started in September 1980 till August 1988. Finally, the war ended with ceasefire and both countries accepted it (Editors). In this war Shia-Sunni conflict also played a major role. Saudi authorities promised Iraqi government

for an aid of US\$25 billion they were worried that the Iranian Revolution was a serious threat to the stability of Saudi Arabia (Illahi). In another case Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2nd 1990, Iran criticized the Iraqi invasion and condemned. In this situation, Saudi Arabia and Iran both rejected the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and had stance that use of force was not a solution to resolve the regional issues (Lesch, 1991).

Hajj Incident 1987

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been of great significance on both sides as it has affected local security in Saudi Arabia many times during the season of Hajj (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011). One such event happened on 31st July 1987 when Makkah, the city of peace, became a site of assassination and it happened when during Hajj Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi security forces resulted death of four hundred lives. According to the Saudis and their allies the said tragic event was a planned rebellion activity while the Iranians and their supporters called it a deliberate mass murder (Kramer).

On this incident Saudi administration imposed a ban on Hajj (pilgrimage) rituals and activities for the citizens of Iran. The protesters in Tehran attacked Saudi embassy. As a result of these attacks, a Saudi official later died from the sustained injuries. In response to this, Saudi Arabia cut the diplomatic relations with Iran in 1988 and asserted that no Iranian could obtain a visa for performing Hajj (Hubbard, 2016).

Proxy in Yemen Leads to Confrontation

There has been a politically infused religious rebel group known as Houthis based in Yemen. On January 2015 the rebelled group

crossed into Saudi Arabian territory where they killed two border guards and seized the area. This compelled the Saudi administration to military operation. Yemen's government and Saudi Arabia accused Iran for arming this rebel group. Iran criticized Saudi Arabia for its intervention in the Shiite insurgency in Yemen. According to local militia they served as military advisors to Houthis and were connected with Iranian Quds Force (Mukhashaf, 2015). The proxy war of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Yemen, Syrian civil war and vested interest in Iraq is still continued and both countries have been accusing each other (BAKER, 2015).

The Tragic Hajj Stampede 2015

On September 23rd 2015 a huge stampede happened on the eve of hajj. In the tragic stampede 717 people (131 Iranian) died and 900 hundred were injured (The Express Tribune, September 24, 2015). Whatever the reason of this stampede was but it escalated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran due to the deaths of Iranian pilgrims. Both countries accused each other for this tragic incident (WATKINS, 2016).

Execution of Nimr al Nimr 2016

Iran has been a political and ideological threat for Saudi Arabia because it extends support to the Shiite minorities in Saudi Arabia (Alam, 2001). On January 2, 2016, 47 people including Shiite cleric Nimr al Nimr were executed many protestors condemned this act. The Saudi embassy in Tehran was set ablaze by the protestors. On January 3rd 2016 Saudi Arabia's cut diplomatic ties with Iran due to the violence at their embassy. Pakistan started its role of mediating to normalize the relations between both countries. For

this purpose Prime Minister of Pakistan and Chief of Army Staff visited both countries. Being the media is the chief source in formulating the public opinion for the reconciliatory role of Pakistan a study about press biasness in coverage of Saud-Iran conflict is imperative.

Statement of the problem

Being the Muslim states Saudi Arabia and Iran both are important for the whole Muslim world. Better relationships between both the countries are the aspirations of the Muslim Ummah. The strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran further deteriorated with the execution of a Shiite religious leader Nimr al-Nimr and other 47 peoples. Pakistan was expected to play a major role to ease the tension as Prime Minister as well Army Chief visited both the countries. The role of Pakistani media during the conflict was much important as it was going to shape a policy that would be important in future relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Press is usually blamed that it performs their role as partisan to one group or another in their own interest.

So it is imperative to know that the media is be sensible or not as the most of the public is rely on them in opinion formation. Hence keeping in view the role of media in agenda setting for the public as well as the policy makers, this study was designed to investigate the biasness in coverage of the conflict by the major leading Pakistani press.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting and Framing Theory

This study is also based on the agenda setting theory of mass communication. The agenda setting theory was introduced by Mc Combs and Donald Shaw in early 1970s. The agenda setting

theory states that with the passage of time media agenda becomes public agenda and media tell people what to think about and how to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Framing theory of mass communication provides a theoretical framework for this study. Framing is a process in which a problem or an issue is being structured and presented. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) explained that media framing is based on the notion that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an impact on how the audience interprets the story. Entman (1993) explained that "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described."

Research Questions and Objectives

This study objectives were to answer the following questions.

RQ 1. To what extent selected newspapers gave coverage to the Saudi-Iran conflict, and whether this extent was same in Urdu and English newspapers or not?

RQ 2. Whether and to what extent mediating role of Pakistan was covered by the selected newspaper in Saudi-Iran conflict?

RQ 3. Whether and to what extent the selected newspapers covered the conflict in War Journalism frames?

RQ4: What was the slant of coverage in news of the selected newspapers?

RQ 5. To what extent positive frames used by the selected newspapers in coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict?

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H1. Urdu newspapers provided more coverage to Saudi-Iran conflict than English newspapers.

H2. The selected newspapers provided more coverage to mediating role of Pakistan as compared to religious sectarianism.

H3. The selected newspapers emphasize on war journalism instead of the peace journalism.

H4. The slant of the coverage is more likely to turn out as neutral than pro Iran or Saudi Arabia.

H5. Most of the frames that were used in sample newspapers were positive.

Research Methodology

Present study used content analysis method. Two widely circulated Urdu newspapers (Jang & Nawa-I-Waqt) and two widely circulated English daily newspapers (Dawn and The News) were the sample of the study. The content of these newspapers was analyzed from 02 January 2016 to 30 March 2016. This time period was selected because of the Yemen war. All the news, editorials, columns and letter to the editors were the contextual unit of analysis. As all these items published in the paper, in terms of slant (Pro Saudi Arabia, Pro Iran or neutral), different frames used and number of words of the each item have been coded for measurement through contextual unit of analysis. Likewise contextual unit, all the stuff news, editorials, columns and letter to the editors is the coding unit for the study. All news stories, column, editorials and letter to the editor regarding Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict in term of theme, frame and slant (Pro Saudi Arabia, Pro Iran or neutral), frequencies and number of words were coded and these were the coding unit of the analysis.

In the aforementioned categories the following frames are selected for this study. The measurements were made on the basis of the whole story as it was a contextual unit. In order to explore the study different frames are made: -

Positive stories are those in which the reconciliatory efforts of Pakistan, peace process were appreciated and all the aggressive acts, war statements from both sides were criticized. The favorable key words for coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict using following words have been categorized as positive, like:

Urdu Newspaper	English Newspaper
(Reconciliatory mission gesture of good will)	1. Holistic mission of Pakistani mediation efforts
1. ٹالٹی کا کردار پوری دنیا میں سراپا گیا	2. Appreciation for reconciliatory efforts
(Mediatory role appreciated worldwide)	3. Both countries show restraint
2. ٹالٹی مشن سے وقار بلند ہوا	4. Opposition must take into confidence about mediation efforts
(Reconciliatory mission boosted dignity)	5. Would not deploy troops to extend aggressive ambitions
3. وزیر اعظم، آرمی چیف دورہ ٹالٹی - مثبت اشارے	6. Dark forces of extremism could take advantage of conflict
(Mediatory visit of Prime Minister, Army Chief... Positive signs)	7. Negative impact of sectarian polarization
4. - پاکستان کو ایران اور سعودیہ کے درمیان ٹالٹی کا کردار ادا کروانا چاہیے۔	
(Pakistan should play its role in Saudi-Iran rift)	
5. کشیدگی صرف انتہا پسندی میں اضافہ کریگی	
(Tension only hype extremism)	
6. سفارت خانہ حملہ، شدید الفاظ میں مذمت	
(Strong condemnation over embassy attack)	
7. تنازعہ میں فریق بننے سے گریز کیا جائے گا	

Negative stories were those in which the war statement, aggressive acts and religious sectarian point of view were emphasized and there conciliatory efforts of Pakistan and peace process were criticized. The favorable key words for coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict using following words have been categorized as negative, like:

Urdu Newspapers	English Newspapers
<p>1 - مذہبی منافرت پھیلانے والے 47 افراد کے سر قلم (47 Propagator of religious hatred beheaded)</p> <p>2- سفارت خانہ حملہ ایک کھلی جارحیت (Embassy attack is open aggression)</p> <p>3- سخت انتقام لیا جائے گا (Harsh revenge would be taken)</p> <p>4- ایران فساد کی جڑ (Iran is Apple of Discard)</p> <p>5- ایران امریکی ایما پر خطے کی صورتحال خراب کر رہا ہے (Under American Patron, Iran is responsible for worsening situation in the region)</p> <p>6- سعودی پالیسیاں دہشت گردی کو بڑھاوا دے رہی ہیں (Policies of Saudi Arabia Provoking terrorism)</p> <p>7- سفارتی تعلقات منقطع ، اسلامی بھائی چارے کا ثبوت</p>	<p>1. Beheading 47 in one day is non-judicial murder</p> <p>2. Biggest mistake of cleric execution</p> <p>3. Divine revenge</p> <p>4. Divided faith</p> <p>5. Mass execution is barbaric act</p> <p>6. Sectarian hate mongering</p> <p>7. Actions of Saudi Arabia provoking aggressions</p> <p>8. Wise step to create Sunni alliance against Shiitte</p>

(Cutting diplomatic ties is a sign of Islamic Brotherhood) 8- ایران خطے میں بگڑتی صورتحال کا ذمہ دار (Iran responsible for dreadful situation in the region) 9- شیعہ سنی مفادات کی لڑائی (War of Shiitte-Sunni Interest) 10- پاکستان ٹالٹی کے کردار میں مخلص نہیں (Pakistan is not sincere to play reconciliatory role)	
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Results

Table 1 shows the overall coverage about this conflict. The “Jang” published 140 stories (27%) whereas; “Nawa-I-Waqt” published 138 stories (26.95%). The “Dawn” published 131 stories (25.58%) while “The News” published 103 stories (20%). The total amount of stories was 512 containing the 262483 words. “Jang” newspaper gave more space stories wise 140 (27%) than other newspapers while according to measurement of words the “Nawa-I-Waqt” gave more space as 92967 (35%).

Table 1: Overall Coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict in selected Pakistani Newspapers

Newspaper	Number of Stories	Total Measurement (in Words)
Jang	140 (27 %)	63678 (24 %)
Nawa-I-Waqt	138 (26.95 %)	92967 (35 %)
Dawn	131 (25.58 %)	51934 (19.78 %)
The News	103 (20 %)	53904 (20.53 %)
Total	512 (100 %)	262483 (100 %)

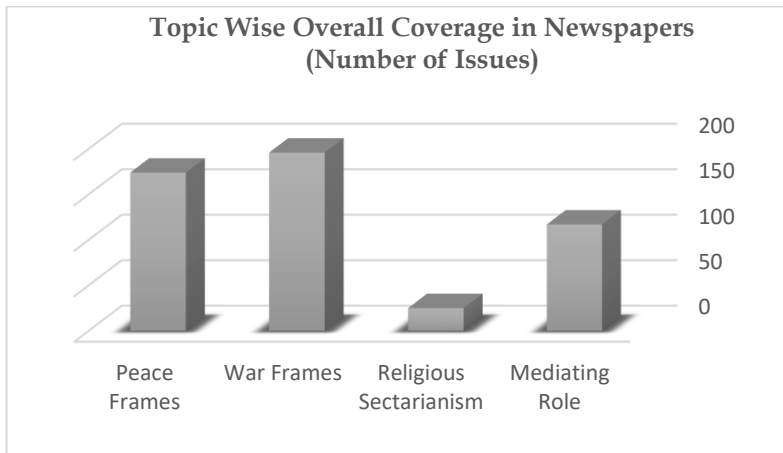
Overall Topic wise coverage in the selected press

According to pre-determined topics to select the items published in the newspapers for further analysis. The range of topics is depicted below in figure 1. The majority of the coverage according

to number of issue is 38 % discussed war. The second majority 33.98 % of the coverage is the topic of peace. The Pakistan Mediating Role was also got enough coverage 22.85 %. According to the word measurement, the majority of the coverage is given to peace as compared to the second last discussion over the war which has been found as 29.67 %.

According to the word measurement, two topics got adequate coverage war 29.67 % and peace 35.85 % the comparison of both the topics tells that the peace overcome on the war topics. In all the sample papers religious sectarianism was discussed lower than all the other topics hence the data reveals that this point of view got very minor coverage in the selected press.

Figure 1: *Topic wise overall coverage in Newspapers to Saudi-Iran conflict*



Overall slant in the selected newspapers

The newspapers analyzed for the slant and narrated below in table 2. In the “Jang” newspaper neutral stories were more discussed as 102 and the stories in favor of Pro Saudi Arabia were found as 28 whereas 10 Pro Iran stories were published in the said

newspaper. The data of “Nawa-I-Waqt” newspaper shows that neutral stories were discussed as 109 and the Pro Saudi Arabia stories got coverage of 21 stories. The stories regarding the Pro Iran frame were published as only 8.

Neutral stories in the “Dawn” newspaper were found as 114 while 9 stories published in the newspaper as Pro-Saudi Arabia. Pro-Iran news stories discussed in the paper were only 8 in number. Figures of “The News” newspaper indicate that neutral stories were discussed as 87 and the Pro Saudi Arabia stories got coverage of 10 stories. On the other hand, only 6 news stories were published with the Pro Iran frames.

Table 2: *Overall Slant in Newspapers*

Slant	Jang		Nawa-I-Waqt		Dawn		The News	
	Stories	Words	Stories	Words	Stories	Words	Stories	Words
Neutral	102	49650	109	74867	114	46676	87	46151
Pro Saudi Arabia	28	9007	21	12454	9	2969	10	4423
Pro Iran	10	5021	8	5646	8	2289	6	3330
Total	140	63678	138	92967	131	51934	103	53904

Frame Wise Coverage in the selected newspapers

The newspapers were examined for the frames covered in the conflict and the data is described below in table 3. The daily Jang newspaper published 80 news stories having number of 38195 words with positive frame while the number of news stories published with negative frames was 60 with 25483 words. In the Nawa-I-Waqt positive stories were found 86 having number of

words 64059 whereas the number of negative stories in this newspaper was 52 having number of words 28908.

Dawn newspaper published 71 positive stories with the words 27951 and the number of news stories with negative frames in the same newspaper was 60 with the number of words 23983. Frames published in "The News" newspaper indicate that this newspaper published positive stories 54 with the number of words 32644 while the news stories with negative frames in this paper were 49 having 21260 words.

Table 3: *Frame Wise Coverage in Newspapers*

Newspaper	Positive		Negative	
	Number of Stories	Words	Number of Stories	Words
Jang	80	38195	60	25483
Nawa I Waqt	86	64059	52	28908
Dawn	71	27951	60	23983
The News	54	32644	49	21260
Total	291	162849	221	99634

Discussion

First of all the main objective was to find out the extent of coverage given to the Saudi-Iran conflict by the selected newspapers of Pakistan. Partially and medium wise comparison of newspapers was made like as stated in the hypothesis that it was assumed that Urdu newspapers provided more coverage than English newspapers. It is generally presumed that Urdu newspapers always give huge coverage to even minor issues and sensationalize the stories. So to analyze this phenomenon scientifically, the first research question was formulated.

This research finds out that quantitatively there was no major difference between the coverage of English and Urdu newspapers as indicated by the results. Equal coverage also

indicates that the matter was not an ordinary event rather it was an important one because both English and Urdu Newspaper readership is from all walks of life either they are general public or policy makers.

H1. Urdu newspapers provided more coverage to Saudi-Iran conflict than English newspapers.

Table 5: Comparison of Urdu and English newspaper coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict

News Papers	News Stories	Chi-Square	P-Value
Urdu Newspapers (Jang and Nawa-I-Waqt)	278 (54.29%)	3.781	0.052
English Newspapers (Dawn and The News)	234 (45.70%)		
Total	512 (100%)		

In terms of our first research question the comparison of Urdu and English newspaper depicted above. Results indicate that Urdu newspapers Jang and Nawa-I-Waqt accumulatively covered this conflict as 278 (54.29%) while English Newspapers Dawn and The News covered accumulatively as 234 (45.70%). We can also observe Chi-Square test that this difference was not found significant at the Chi-Square test 3.781; P=Value 0.052 which is greater than level of significance, so it shows that results are insignificant hence the hypothesis regarding more coverage by the Urdu newspaper is not supported. So, we conclude that there is no difference in coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict between both Urdu and English newspaper.

In our second objective we were focused to investigate the mediating role of Pakistan in the Saudi-Iran conflict by the

leading press. The relationship between both countries became soared following the execution of the Shiite leader Nimr al-Nimr and this tension reached at its peak when infuriated protestors fired the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and later on all diplomatic ties were cut by both countries. It was the time when Pakistan realized its responsibility to play its role to reduce the tension in the best interest of the whole region.

Along with mediating role, it was another objective that whether religious sectarianism was also a prominent theme in the coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict or not. It is a ground reality that Pakistani society is not only religiously active but sometimes they strongly react when something happens internationally and hurts their sentiments. Likewise this issue was also a very important one because being a Muslim society both countries are esteemed icon of their faith.

H2: The selected newspapers provided more coverage to mediating role of Pakistan as compared to religious sectarianism.

Table 6: *Overall Topic (Mediating Role-Religious Sectarianism) distribution*

Topic	News Stories	Chi-Square	P-Value
Mediating Role	117 (82%)	59.6	0.00
Religious Sectarianism	25 (18%)		
Total	142 (100%)		

In the investigation of the second research question, to explore the Pakistan’s role in mediating Saudi-Iran conflict in the

coverage. The weightage of each category with reference to this conflict is illustrated above. Topic mediating role included 82% whereas religious sectarianism encompassed 18%. Comparison with the other variable Religious Sectarianism and the result of Chi-Square we can observe that test value is 59.6 while P-Value is 0.000 which is smaller than level of significance, so it shows that results are significant hence the hypothesis mediating role of Pakistan was covered in most of the stories, is supported. So, results indicate that in Saudi-Iran conflict, enormous coverage to mediating role of Pakistan than Religious Sectarianism was given by the selected press. The results of study negate the answer that religious sectarianism was dominated in the coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict. As it was the lowest theme of the coverage from all the newspapers that the issue was result of religious sectarianism.

H3: The selected newspapers emphasize on war journalism instead of the peace journalism.

Table 7: *Overall Topic (War-Peace) distribution*

Topic	Observed Frequencies	Chi-Square	P-Value
War	196 (53%)	1.308	0.253
Peace	174 (47%)		
Total	370 (100%)		

Analysis of the third research question, to discover the difference in war versus peace journalism was ascertained. Each category with reference to this conflict is demonstrated in aforementioned table. Topic "War" included 53% while the theme of "Peace" got coverage 47%. Comparisons of both the variables indicate that a slightly difference exists between category "war"

and "peace" treatment. The share of war is 38% while peace got 34% coverage. In addition to this the results of Chi-Square 1.308 with P-Value 0.253 further indicate that the results are insignificant so the hypothesis is not supported.

As it was a major goal of the study to discover whether newspapers emphasize on war journalism instead of the peace journalism in their coverage. War journalism theme was primarily focused on reporting of the aggressive acts etc. while Peace Journalism was ascertained according to text contained the concept of efforts for bringing down the situation to normal condition. Therefore, the results indicate that there is no major difference in the coverage pattern of War and Peace theme during Saudi-Iran conflict.

H4: The slant of the coverage is more likely to turn out as neutral than pro Iran or Saudi Arabia.

Table 8: Overall Slant in Coverage

Slant	Stories	Chi-Square	P-Value
Neutral	412 (80.46%)	5.157	0.000
Pro Saudi Arabia	68 (13.28%)		
Pro Iran	32 (6.25%)		
Total	512 (100%)		

Table 8 illustrates the slant given to the conflict by the selected newspapers. In the analysis of this research question, slant of coverage in news of the selected newspapers was investigated. Highest percentage is 80% belongs to neutral coverage while 13% lies to "Pro Saudi Arabia" and the "Pro Iran" has the lowest percentage of 6%. In addition to these comparative

figures, the results of Chi-Square 5.157 with P-Value 0.000 indicate that results are significant hence the hypothesis is supported that "Neutral" coverage is more than the tilt towards any country in the coverage of this conflict by the leading Pakistani press.

H5: Most of the frames that were used in sample newspapers were positive.

Table 9: *Overall Frames (Positive-Negative) distribution in selected Pakistani Newspapers*

Newspapers	News Stories	Chi-Square	P-Value
Positive	291 (57%)	9.570	0.002
Negative	221 (43%)		
Total	512 (100%)		

In terms of the above stated research question the newspapers analyzed to see either more negative stories covered or positive one. Result shows in Table 9 that positive frames as 291 (57%) while negative frames 221 (43%). We can also observe that Chi-Square test is 9.570 while P-Value is 0.002 which is significant hence the hypothesis is supported that positive frames are more used in the coverage. Hence assessment of the data exhibits that the assumption is true as in the coverage of Saudi-Iran conflict most of the stories are positive.

Conclusion

This study reveals that a significant coverage was given to the Saudi Iran conflict by leading Pakistani newspapers. In this study a common perception was also negated that Urdu newspapers more exaggerate in reporting than English newspaper. With reference to themes used in the coverage it can be concluded that they highlighted mediating role of Pakistan and they avoided to paint the issue in the light of religious sectarianism.

The result of the study show that the selected newspapers used positive frames, neutrality in slant and proper placement. The results are evident to conclude that the leading Pakistani newspapers have done excellent work to convey the promoting peace message by using positive frames, reconciliation efforts and avoid painting the issue in religious sectarianism perspective and negativity.

Suggestions and Recommendations

On the basis of these results, following are some suggestions and recommendations for the media and future researchers.

- As in the cited conflict, sensible reporting through objectivity and neutrality was made hence the same standard should be maintained. Because this is the desirous standard to cover any type of conflict.
- In such like sensitive issues where the Government is going to play a reconciliatory role then to create a hyper-reality should always be avoided.
- Where the religion and religious sentiments involved in that case more care should be taken. In Sectarian reporting any discriminatory frame could hype the public anger to its peak. And using of biased frames could just add fuel to the fire hence such patterns should always be discouraged.
- The mediating efforts made by the Pakistan in the Saudi-Iran conflict should be acknowledged and the other nations should adopt such commendable role in case tensions arise anywhere.

- Biased reporting and embroidered framing just for the sake of making event more sensational is a destructive way and it can effect on the policy making process so this pattern should entirely be dejected.

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