



## Representation of US, Pakistani Government and its Military after the Operation 'Neptune Spear' in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*

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**Abstract:** *This research study looks at the representation of US and Pakistani governments and their military in the coverage of The New York Times and The Guardian after the Abbottabad Operation. The coverage of these two newspapers has been studied for the consecutive ten days. The aim is to show that whether these two newspapers stayed critical or friendly of the Pakistani and the US governments? Will it also demonstrate that was the Pakistani government criticized more in the coverage than its military? The findings, based on the Quantitative Content Analysis, demonstrate that The New York Times was more critical of the Pakistani government than The Guardian. It further shows that both the newspapers criticized the Pakistani military/ Intelligence Agencies more than the Pakistani government. The findings also reveal that both the newspapers appreciated the US in their coverage.*

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### Introduction

Osama bin Laden was shot dead by the US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 2, 2011. The U.S. and her allies chased bin Laden for more than ten years. It was one of the biggest manhunts in human history (Dawn, 2011b). The Operation 'Neptune Spear', which lasted for almost forty minutes, left five dead – including bin Laden – and three injured. Initially, his killing sparked the waves of celebration among the allies of the War on Terror, and the Pakistani Prime Minister too welcomed it (Gillani, 2011). The Pakistani President also appreciated the operation, in his article published in the Washington Post soon after bin Laden's death, and called him 'evil' (Zardari, 2011).

The killing of bin Laden also couldn't unite the then ruling Pakistani government and Military establishment (Marwan, 2016) and it resulted in the escalation of tension between the two, which resulted in the Memogate Commission. The tensions resulted in the resignation of the Pakistani Ambassador to the US, Hussain Haqqani. The Prime Minister of Pakistan, on the floor of the National Assembly, in the shadow of prevailing tension, said that there couldn't be a state within a state (Gillani, 2011).

The Inter-Services Public Relations department of Pakistan's military issued a statement to the media soon after the operation

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that one of the helicopters of Pakistan's military has been crashed near the Kakool Training Academy, Abbottabad, due to some technical fault (Geo News, 2011). It was the US officials and media that broke the news to the world that bin Laden had been killed in Operation 'Neptune Spear' in Pakistan. Though then-President Obama appreciated the help of the Pakistani government – but came short of saying that it was a 'joint operation' (Obama, 2011).

Thus, these connections make it necessary to look at the representation of the Pakistani government, its military and the US government soon after the operation. It will help us understand that did the selected newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* stayed critical or friendly of them.

### Research Questions

The main research questions answered in this research study are the following:

- 1) Were *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* supportive or critical of the Pakistani government after bin Laden's killing?
- 2) Were *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* supportive or critical of the Pakistani military?
- 3) Were *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* supportive or critical of the US government and its military after the Abbottabad Operation?

### Literature Review

Mainstream media play a vital role while reporting any conflict ([Thussu and Freedman 2003, p.4-5](#)). Thussu and Freedman stress that the mainstream media can work both as a supporter and critic of the government – but in order to report the issue independently, it is mandatory on the part of journalists to shrug off the 'ideological and organizational restrictions' to counter the dominant voices of both the government and establishment (ibid 2003).

[Magder \(2003\)](#) also claims that 'state actors' always play an important role in deciding the

direction of reporting (p.36). He claims that media coverage of foreign events is influenced by informative frames offered by the 'political elites': once they (political elites) define the event in the context of 'national security' with some level of 'legitimacy', the media outlets will also adopt the 'patriotic' tone on the issue (ibid 2003). Abbottabad Operation was also one of such events, which was considered the US story by many researchers and media practitioners as all the information related to the operation was coming from the US officials.

Many researchers, including [Magder \(2003\)](#), claim that the American media has favored its government in the crisis situation – especially the 9/11 attacks in which it showed patriotism while covering the attacks. The patriotism in the coverage of the 9/11 attacks was not only visible in the language of American media, but it was equally visible in the get up of most of the American reporters too. It has been confirmed that after the 9/11 attacks, the majority of American journalists were busy exhibiting patriotism by wearing flag pins. Different media networks even changed the appearance of their logos, like the logo of *CNN* was displayed in the American flag. This was not only the case with electronic media, but the print media also followed the same path. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the issue of *Time* magazine carried the name of the magazine covered with the American flag. Researchers working in different regions of the world mostly criticize such acts of patriotism practised by the reporters while covering the traumatic events in different parts of the world. They are of the opinion that the job of the reporter is to explore the issue [impartially] to the people by asking questions – but not to act as a 'Cheerleader' ([Ward 2010](#)).

Moreover, many analysts claim that in times of patriotism, 'the dissent is muted' ([Carter and Barringer, 2001](#)). This view, in the context of media coverage of the 9/11 attacks, is supported by [Schudson \(2002; p: 40\)](#) by claiming that almost all the TV channels of the US instantly turned from the 'sphere of legitimate controversy' to the 'sphere of consensus'.

Another researcher, [Ahmad \(2008\)](#), while conducting research on the 9/11 attacks, also concluded that the US media outlets were influenced by the government agenda. Such differences usually become clearer when the content of different media outlets is studied for the coverage of the same event. [Haes \(2003\)](#) conducted research on the comparative coverage of the German and American news sources while covering the 9/11 attacks. The study revealed that American news sources followed the patriotic view, while the German news sources stressed the international cooperation in addressing terrorism.

The glimpses of such patriotic coverage could also be seen in the British media while reporting the 9/11 attacks; [Bromley and Cushion \(2002\)](#), after conducting their research on the portrayal of 9/11 in the UK press, mentioned that after the 9/11 attacks, *Daily Mirror* covered its front page by displaying a quarter size picture of President Bush along with his quote: “Freedom itself was attacked by a faithless coward, freedom will be defended”. The coverage of *Daily Express* also followed the patriotic line as it highlighted the event in the traditional popular press discourse by saying that ‘the marriage of religion and terror created an invisible foe’ (ibid 2002).

The research study conducted by [Storie, Madden & Liu \(2013; p: 435\)](#) also confirmed that both the Russian and the US media failed to cover bin Laden’s death as an ‘international’ issue and their coverage differed drastically. They claim that the US sample was telling the simple US-centered story of “good prevailing evil” or “heroes against villains”. It promoted the US as “good guys” and (justified) that the demise of “villains” at the hands of the US was a legitimate and necessary action. They also claimed that the US media, in the sample, focused on the US story, and the US media did not view the international audience as their target public.

But despite all the criticism, [Thussu \(2000, p.164\)](#) appreciates that the US media – despite having close links with the officials – is not in the government’s control, and thus it has earned ‘credibility’ in return; which provides them with the ability to share constantly ‘accurate, fast and

authoritative news and information’ with the world.

The above different research studies show the approach of the American media and journalists while covering the conflict – related to the US. It shows that mostly when the story revolves around the American people, the American media show bias by practising patriotism and thus, they fail to challenge the ruling elite and their narratives. It will be assessed in this research study that how the American and British premium newspapers addressed the US and Pakistani governments and their military after the Abbottabad Operation.

### Research Framework

This research study relates to the representation of the Pakistani and US governments and their military in the British and American media. One premium newspaper has been selected from both the US and UK. The newspaper selected from the US is *The New York Times*, and the newspaper selected from the UK is *The Guardian*. Both are considered influential newspapers in the international arena and the leading newspapers of their country. Both are left-wing newspapers and have a team of professional journalists to cover national and international issues.

The coverage of these newspapers has been studied for the consecutive ten days – starting from the death of bin Laden in the Abbottabad Operation. Due to the differences in the time of both the UK and the US, the content of *The New York Times* has been studied from May 2, 2011, to May 11, 2011; while the content of *The Guardian* has been studied from May 3, 2011, to May 12, 2011. All the news stories containing the name ‘Osama bin Laden’ has been selected, studied, coded and analyzed in this research study.

The hard copies of *The Guardian* newspaper were collected from the Department of Journalism Studies, University of Sheffield, UK, while the news stories of the missing dates were collected from the ‘Nexis-UK’ by entering the phrase ‘Osama bin Laden’ in search engine. The data of *The New York Times* was also selected by the LexisNexis method by searching the phrase

'Osama bin Laden' on its website search engine along with the mention of relevant dates. As different news stories came up in the result, they were collected and then scrutinized. Only those stories were selected which were published in the printed version (please note that such information was usually given at the end of the news story along with the page number where it was published). It is important to mention that a total of 176 news stories have been studied in this research study, which includes 105 of *The New York Times* and 71 of *The Guardian*.

### Research Methodology

A research method of 'Quantitative Content Analysis' has been employed in this research to answer all the outstanding research questions. Many researchers claim that "quantitative (content) analysis is (the) most efficient (method) when explicit hypotheses or research questions are posed" ([Riffe, Lacy and Fico 1998, p.37](#)).

Charles R. Wright (cited in [Berger 2000, p.273](#)) defines content analysis as "the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories. It may include the quantitative and as well as the qualitative analysis, or both".

[Hansen \(1998, p.95\)](#) also claims: "Content Analysis by definition is a Quantitative Method and it basically stresses on identifying and counting the occurrences of the specified characteristics or dimensions of the text and on the basis of which one is able to say something about the messages, images, and representations of such texts and their wider social significance". The same method was employed in this research study in which the 'specified characteristics or dimensions' (in the form of different statements made) were identified in every news item and were coded accordingly.

[Holsti \(1969, p.14\)](#) further argues that such 'specified characteristics of messages' should be identified 'objectively and systematically'. The same procedure was adopted in this research study, that instead of keeping an opinion on the overall news item (that it is pro-government or

pro-establishment etc.), the original statements made were collected and then were put in the exact value of the identified variable.

Hence, the above discussions make the 'Quantitative Content Analysis' the most suitable research method to answer the questions raised in this study.

### Findings and Discussion

The findings below have been presented in the three sections: the first section debates the statements made about the Pakistani government; the second section discusses the statements made about the Pakistani military/Intelligence Agencies, and the last section examines the statements made about the US government and its military. Pakistan's government has been looked at separately from its military due to the differences in their stand on the issue – Abbottabad Operation.

### Representation of the Pakistani Government

In this research study, the first three statements made about the Pakistani government in the news items of the two newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* – have been selected, coded and studied. It must be noted that initially randomly selected 61 statements were identified in the coding sheet – but later on, when the data was entered into the SPSS, then it was recoded into seven. It is further important to note that these statements have been made by the different US, Pakistani and British sources etc.

The basic purpose of collecting this data was to know that if the Pakistani government, in particular, was discussed in the news items, then what was more often said about them. This data will indeed help us know about the general impression of the Pakistani government in the coverage. The results can be seen in Table 1.

If we look at the coverage of *The Guardian* newspaper, it is evident that the newspaper has highlighted Pakistan's point of view more in their coverage. Since the US-led operation in Abbottabad was considered as an attack on

Pakistan’s soil by the Pakistani military and its government officials (who later changed their stance), the newspaper has tried not to stay much critical of the Pakistani government. Though there are statements in the coverage, which puts pressure on the Pakistani government to punish all those who are responsible for providing refuge to bin Laden, a declared ‘terrorist’. The findings also show that the newspaper knew that bin Laden’s death and stay in Pakistan would not bring any good fortune to the country – except more accusations and demand to ‘do more’ in the ongoing War on Terror. It must also be noted that the cooperation of the Pakistani government in tracing and killing bin Laden has also been mentioned in the coverage.

Overall, the findings show that *The Guardian* newspaper represented the Pakistani government in a very balanced way. They apparently seem more concerned about the strained Pak-US relations than putting pressure on the Pakistani government to explain their position. They gave coverage to their stand – but they also stayed critical of them by putting pressure on them to explain the discovery of a

high-value target in the garrison city, Abbottabad.

*The New York Times*, like *The Guardian*, too highlighted the Pakistani government reaction on the issue, but they too stayed critical of the government by raising the questions about the discovery of bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. They insist on establishing a commission to punish all those responsible for helping bin Laden during his stay in Abbottabad, demonstrating that the newspaper was equally critical. The newspaper was also aware that this episode, Abbottabad Operation, in the War on Terror, would not bring anything good to the Pakistani government.

The data overall shows that *The New York Times* was more critical of the Pakistani government than *The Guardian* – though they both gave coverage to their views. It is understandable as bin Laden was accused of killing the innocent people on US soil by orchestrating the 9/11 attacks. Similarly, he was also accused of 7/7 attacks in UK – but *The Guardian* has tried to find the middle point in the issue by staying both friendly and critical.

**Table 1.** First Three Statements Made about the Pakistani Government

Newspaper	Statements						Total Number of stories	
	Bin Laden also waged war against Pakistan.	Bin Laden’s killing and discovery both problems for Pakistani government.	Abbottabad Operation is the violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty and the attack has	The GOP should openly share their stand on the issue of death and operation with the people.	The independent commission, formed by the GOP, must punish all those who sheltered bin Laden or were unable to	The struggle of US and intelligence sharing by the GOP ensured the bin Laden’s		
The Guardian	1 0.5%	13 6%	19 9%	0 0%	5 2%	5 2%	170 80%	213 100%
The New York Times	1 0.3%	8 2.5%	11 3%	0 0%	10 3%	9 3%	276 88%	315 100%
Total	2	21	30	0	15	14	446	528



## Representation of the Pakistan's Military/ Intelligence Agencies

Pakistan's military, like Pakistani government, also remained an important part of this Abbottabad Operation. There was impression in Pakistan that the Abbottabad Operation is actually failure of the Pakistan's military. The Pakistani military also showed deep reservations over the US operation. It is now important to look into the first three statements made about the Pakistani military/ intelligence agencies. It will demonstrate that was the coverage critical or friendly of the Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies.

It must be noted that initially the data was collected on the basis of randomly selected 23 statements, which were later recoded into seven to better understand the coverage. Please note that again these statements have been made by the different sources. The findings can be seen in the Table 2.

The findings demonstrate that both the selected newspaper, in this research study, focused more on the criticism of Pakistan's army for their failure to trace bin Laden/ defend the country from US aggression and even raising voice for an inquiry into the issue.

**Table 2.** First Three Statements made about the PAKISTAN'S Military

News- paper	The failure of Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies for not tracing the bin Laden and countering the US attack demands investigation.	The relations between the US and Pakistan will remain tense up to intelligence sharing level after the operation.	The intelligence agencies of both the US and Pakistan are in touch and sharing information.	The security officials have sealed off the bin Laden' s villa and the Kakool Road.	No statement made.	Total Number of statements
The Guardian	29 14%	3 1%	1 0.5%	0 0%	180 84.5%	213 100%
The New York Times	33 10%	3 1%	3 1%	2 1%	274 87%	315 100%
Total	62	6	4	2	454	528

If we re-categorize the statement "Pak Army/ Intelligence Agencies failed to locate bin Laden/ defend Pakistan from the US attack, it must be

investigated" further into some major components, the following results come in front of us, shown in the Table 3, below.

**Table 3.** Re-categorization of the Statement about the Pakistan’s Army/ Intelligence Agency

Name of a Newspaper	The failure of intelligence agencies of Pakistan for not tracing a bin Laden will be thoroughly investigated.	How Intelligence Agencies of Pakistan were not aware of bin Laden’s stay in Abbottabad?	Kakool Training Academy was very near to bin Laden’s villa so how the Pakistani intelligence agencies didn’t get wind of it?	The Pakistani Military faced failure in defending the country from US attack.	The Pakistani intelligence agencies didn’t succeed in tracing bin Laden.
The Guardian	0	15	6	3	5
The New York Times	1	23	1	2	6

From the above segregation of statements, made about the Pakistani military, it is clear that *The New York Times* was more critical of the Pakistani military than *The Guardian*. Earlier, it was discussed that *The Guardian* tried to keep the balance approach in representing the Pakistani government – but it stayed critical of the Pakistani military. It is evident from the majority of the statements that criticized the Pakistani military for not tracing the bin Laden or his discovery near the military-run Kakool Training Academy.

*The New York Times* in its coverage was more critical than *The Guardian*. It questioned more the Pakistani military and its intelligences for not finding bin Laden, who was living near them. It was earlier observed, in the statements made about the Pakistani government, that *The New York Times* was critical of the Pakistani government – but this data shows that they were more critical of the Pakistani military than its government.

### Representation of the US Government/ Army

The US government and its military are directly related to the Abbottabad Operation. They conducted the operation in Abbottabad and killed bin Laden, whom they chased for more than a decade. It was also debated earlier that after the

operation, most of the news was coming from the US. It will be now important to see that how the two selected newspapers represented the US in their coverage.

Initially, the data was collected on the basis of randomly selected 42 statements, which were later on squeezed into eight to understand the coverage better. Again, these statements have been made by the different sources. The results can be seen in the Table4.

The findings demonstrate that *The Guardian* though didn’t discuss the US government/military in its coverage – but the mentioned statements show that they highlighted the US version of the story. The newspaper claimed the bin Laden’s killing is the greatest success of US in the war on terror and it was possible due to the hard struggle made by the US forces and government. The newspaper avoided calling US a ‘tyrant’ power.

*The New York Times*, on the other hand, was more supportive of the US government and its military. They appreciated the US more over the operation and bin Laden’s killing than *The Guardian*. But, it is also a fact that *The New York Times* too criticized the US more than *The Guardian* by calling her a ‘tyrant’ power.

The findings show that both the selected newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* – showed favoritism to the US

government and military in their coverage and avoided criticism on them. It was earlier seen that the newspapers were critical of both the Pakistani

government and its military – but they remained friendly of the US government and its military.

**Table 4.** Representation of the US Government/ Arm

	Bin Laden' s killing is success of the US and relief for the relatives of the September 11 victims.	Bin Laden' s killing.	The efforts made by the US government, its intelligence agencies and Navy SEALs ensured bin Laden' s killing.	Bin Laden' s killing and future of War on Terror.	The US policy/ UN resolution regarding the War on Terror supports the bin Laden' s killing.	The oppressor US' s actual war is against the Islam and Pakistan.	US trying to find out that were the Pakistani government aware of the bin Laden' s stay or the elements that sheltered him?	The US government should share the proof of bin Laden' s death with the public.	No statement made	Total statements
The Guardian	8 4%	6 3%	4 2%	1 0.5%	0 0%	4 2%	2 1%	188 88%	213 100%	
The New York Times	13 4%	7 2%	9 3%	1 0.3%	8 2.5%	7 2%	3 1%	267 85%	315 100%	
Total	21	13	13	2	8	11	5	455	528	

## Conclusion

This research study attempted to show the representation of the Pakistani and US governments and their military, in the coverage of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, after the Abbottabad Operation. The findings show that *The New York Times* was more critical of the Pakistani government than *The Guardian*. It further demonstrates that both the newspapers also criticized the Pakistani military/ Intelligence Agencies in their coverage more than the Pakistani government. The data also shows that

*The New York Times* also appreciated the US government/ military more than *The Guardian*.

It was earlier debated in the literature review that both the American and British journalists and their media outlets showed patriotism while covering the 9/11 attacks. The same impression can be also seen in the coverage of operation 'Neptune Spear', where both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* appreciated the US government and its military more than the Pakistani government and its military – though *The New York Times* was critical of the Pakistani government and its military than *The Guardian*.



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