

## Primetime TV Talk Shows and PEMRA's Code of Conduct: A Case Study of Capital Talk, Off the Record and On the Front with Kamran Shahid

**Abstract:** *The importance of media in the globalized world has multiplied many folds. The government and the other stakeholders always try to propagate their narratives to the public and inform and convince them about the different prevailing issues. The primetime private TV talk shows are often seen as the most important genre of mass media that informs and educates viewers about the different issues. This study focuses on three leading TV talk shows named "Capital Talk", "Off the Record", and "On the Front with Kamran Shahid". This research study's prime objective is to investigate whether the selected TV talk shows follow the PEMRA's code of conduct in their programs or not? The researchers utilized the 'Content Analysis' as a research method to investigate all the queries. Based on the analysis of June 2018 TV talk shows, the findings reveal that PEMRA's code of conduct has not been followed by all the three selected TV talk shows, and they breached it in different ways and levels.*

### Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Literature Review](#)
- [Research Framework](#)
- [Research Methodology](#)
- [Theoretical Framework](#)
- [Findings](#)
- [Status of Language used](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

**Key Words:** Pakistan; TV Talk Shows; PEMRA; Code of Conduct; Ethics.

### Introduction

Pakistan's electronic media has become highly influential due to its informative and vibrant nature. There has been the mushroom growth of private TV channels in Pakistan after the PEMRA Ordinance 2002, and since its operation, they have tried to inform and educate people about political, social, and cultural issues. Compared to the other genres of electronic media, political talk shows have relatively become more popular in Pakistan over the years. These talk shows have tried to promote awareness among the people

about different issues, but critics believe they have also misled them by distracting their attention from core issues through their biased and subjective conduct (Jamil, 2010).

Thus, it becomes important to study the content of political talk shows on-air by the leading private TV channels to examine the degree of subjectivity and ethics. To study how these shows are done considering the Code of Conduct of the PEMRA, the researchers have selected the three Talk Shows, including *Capital Talk*, on-air by *Geo News*, *Off the Record*, and

\* M.Phil Scholar, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

† Lecturer, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar KP, Pakistan.

Email: [hamzamarwan@uop.edu.pk](mailto:hamzamarwan@uop.edu.pk) (*Corresponding Author*)

‡ Lecturer, College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

broadcasted by *ARY News*, and *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* telecasted by *Dunya News*.

The researchers feel the need to examine these talk shows closely to figure out if the PEMRA's code of conduct, issued on August 19 2015, followed or breached during the operation of those programs. Section 4 of the PEMRA code of conduct explicitly specifies that services, including talk shows, be performed impartially and that representatives from political parties be paid proper consideration, but unfortunately, such guidelines are not always followed.

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

1. Do the hosts of the selected TV talk shows impartially conduct the programs?
2. Which political parties get representation in these selected TV talk shows?
3. Do the TV channels promote their Agenda through these talk shows via their hosts?
4. What is the status of language used in these chosen TV talk shows?

The answer to all these research questions will help us understand whether the selected TV talk shows follow the PEMRA's Code of Conduct in their programs. Indeed, these guidelines help the media professionals to boost their standard of coverage and professionalism.

## Literature Review

In Pakistan, a variety of programs are broadcasted by the TV channels round-the-clock in which the talk shows have become much more popular. In such shows, hosts and guests usually discuss topics related to the country's current political scenario. The topics of the shows are usually decided by the program's host and the production team ([Meijer, 2001](#); [Harrington, 2008](#)). While the Talk Shows are deemed part of the media, journalism ethics are seldom practised. It has been often noticed that Talk Shows are often sensationalized and filled with political rhetoric ([Baym, 2005](#)).

Primetime Television Talk Shows are considered one of the imperative genres of Television programming. It has the power to inform and educate the viewers about various issues. Many critics believe that this is the 'opinion moulding' brand of Broadcast

Journalism ([Mittell, 2003](#); [Wheeler, 2010](#)). However, this critical brand of journalism has often been criticized by academia, media practitioners, and numerous independent media organizations, primarily for failing to serve their position in the right way ([Bangash, 2013](#); [Dickerson, 1978](#); [Wheeler, 2010](#)).

There is no question that TV is the most influential mass medium with the ability to influence audiences and alter their views and attitudes, and in particular, scientists consider visuals to be the most influential, relevant, and compelling sources of knowledge. However, it has been observed that news anchors in talk shows are usually biased by sharing one-sided opinions. [Siddique and Rahman \(2017\)](#) describe biasedness as "a consistent tendency to depart from the straight path of objective truth by deviating either to the left or the right." Therefore, viewers cannot receive accurate, unbiased, and objective facts – related to an issue.

Media bias provides incomplete and one-sided details to the public as the anchor masks details favouring a party or group that aims to sway public opinion in favour of the entity or organization they support. This practice is against the basic principles of journalism and attempts to mislead public opinion on the country's political, institutional, and legal issues. It has been found that anchors usually do not support a person or a candidate, but they rather advocate and campaign for them implicitly – while overwhelmingly criticizing others.

The anchor also praises the positive points of the candidate and masks his weak points to portray him to the public as the most desirable and fitting party or entity. In Pakistan, most anchorpersons lack professional training and thus hard to follow journalistic ethics while hosting TV talk shows ([Khan and Yousafzai, 2012](#)). The researchers concluded that the anchors come to the program with their point of view or plan and attempt to impose it on the show's participants by following every possible strategy (*ibid*, 2012).

The previous research studies also reinforce that the talk show hosts offer their analyses and perspectives to support their points of view and ask interviewees biased questions that may reflect their point of view. In addition, when the

anchors disrupt them without finishing their points, the interviewees frequently do not have adequate time to present their viewpoints and explain themselves or their organization during the discussion. The anchors' biased analysis and slanting of the facts anchorperson violate professional ethics ([Khan and Yousafzai, 2012](#)).

However, despite all the criticism and the lack of professionalism, Pakistan's political and current affairs programs are still popular. There is no denying that talk shows have a massive audience among all ages of the country's population, who sincerely believe in their content. [Siddique and Rahman \(2017\)](#) found that 36% of females and 63.3% of males have a high interest in watching political talk shows in Pakistan. However, only 13% of students used to watch the political talk shows to keep themselves abreast of the country's political situation. Their research has shown that most students perceive the political talk shows to be politically biased and that their contents regarding the constitution and the country's law are vastly inaccurate. They argued that it could not be treated as a credible source of information.

Similarly, [Butt \(2016\)](#) revealed that most TV audiences believe that political talk shows are a significant source of learning about the country's political situation. The researcher found that 92.5% of the respondents believed that the media, particularly talk shows, were a source of political knowledge among the masses. The findings revealed that 61.7% of respondents shared that they were watching/listening to political talk shows, and most of them accepted that political talk shows provide them with political information. Another research conducted by Anwar and Muhammad (2010) explored that private TV channels are the lifeline of political socialization in Pakistan. They concluded that the current political communication of private TV channels is helping the development of the political public sphere in the country.

## Research Framework

This research study is based on the content analysis of three leading TV talk shows, including *Capital Talk*, *Off the Record*, and *On the Front with Kamran Shahid*. The contents of these three Talk Shows have been analyzed for

one month, i.e., June 2018. It must be noted that the researchers relied on purposive sampling and carefully selected the three talk shows. These three talk shows were considered the highly viewed programs in Pakistan in June 2018 – one month before General Elections 2018 – according to the data issued by the Media logic (website).

The reason for selecting the month of June for studying the talk shows lies in the decision taken by the Election Commission of Pakistan as they issued the election schedule on May 31, 2018. A total of 46 episodes of the selected TV talk shows were studied in this research project that was on-air from Monday to Thursday every week. It includes 15 episodes of *Capital Talk* and *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* and 16 episodes of *Off the Record*. All these programs were downloaded from the website [www.unewstv.com](http://www.unewstv.com).

## Research Methodology

The researchers utilized content analysis as a research method to answer all the outstanding research queries. It is a method by which some observable contents, such as texts, images, objects, etc., are transferred through coding into quantifiable and verifiable forms. Conducting a content analysis follows the general research process for quantitative inquiries. Perhaps the most distinctive part is constructing a coding scheme, a detailed instruction for identifying and classifying the units of analysis.

Most researchers believe that quantitative content analysis is the most precise method to stipulate the characteristics of the message. [Berelson \(1952\)](#) defined content analysis as "a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for communication".

Wimmer & Roger (1987) further clarified the term systemic as the content under analysis would be chosen according to consistently implemented rules and handled in the same way for impartial, objective outcomes. They further claimed that the definitions of operations and the rules for classifying variables should be clear. Content analysis means the precise depiction of textual or visual messages or content, and it is

mostly achieved through the quantitative nature of the content analysis.

The content review was further interpreted by both communication scientists, stating that it explains communication content, examines hypotheses of messaging features, compares media content to the real world, measures the image of various communities in society, and provides a starting point for media influence studies.

The essential purpose of the content analysis is not to count. The content that will be classified (or coded) must be pertinent to the study's queries ([Hansen et al. 1998](#)). Valid coding sheets were prepared in this analysis to fit all the values of the various variables.

Based on the queries, the researcher formed a coding sheet of eight variables to ascertain the accurate answers to the questions. The intercoder reliability test of the coding sheet was further done through a colleague who holds a PhD degree and is well-versed in research. After achieving the 90% similarity, the coding sheet was formally applied to collect the data from the selected programs.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The findings of this research study are informed by the "Social Responsibility Theory". It emphasizes the socially responsible role of media by staying objective, balanced, and serving society. It enables the media organizations to practice freedom of speech without any censorship – but, at the same time, it also bounds them to act responsibly.

Mass Media researchers, including [McQuail, Golding, and Bens \(2005\)](#), emphasized the following basic principles of Social Responsibility Theory.

1. The media should accept and accomplish certain obligations to society.
2. These obligations are primarily to be served by creating high or competent standards of information, truth, authenticity, objectivity, and balance.
3. The media should be able to self-regulate (codes of conduct/ ethics) within the legal system and existing frameworks in

embracing and enforcing these responsibilities.

4. Offensive content that causes violence, abuse, civil disorder and disruption to minority communities should be discouraged in the media.
5. The media, in general, should be pluralist and represent the uniqueness of their culture, providing exposure to diverse viewpoints and responses.
6. To protect the privilege and culture, the public have the right to expect high performance and interventions that can be justified.
7. Journalists and media professionals must be liable to society, employers and the market.

The above discussion makes this Social Responsibility Theory relevant to the research study. It also investigates the role of the Pakistani private TV channels in discussing different political issues in their talk shows. It would inform us that did the selected TV channels in their talk shows inform the public in the right way as suggested by the Social Responsibility Theory?

## **Findings**

The findings of this research study have been divided into four sections. The first section informs the readers about the data related to the leading questions asked by the hosts of the selected TV talk shows during the programs; the second section debates the representation of the political parties in the selected TV talk shows; the third section enlightens the readers about the promotion of channel's Agenda by the host of the program; while the last section examines the status of language used by host and guests in the programs.

The findings – discussed below in the different sections of this research study – would contribute to a larger discussion did the selected TV talk shows follow the PEMRA Code of Conduct or not?

## **Leading questions asked in the selected TV talk Shows**

The leading question refers to the biased question asked by hosts from the guest during the

program. It refers to such a question in which the host gives hints of favorable responses. The anchorperson posed leading questions in which hints of responses were already given to the guests in the asked questions. This section is

significant because it reveals the partiality and impartiality of the anchorperson while conducting a program. The findings can be seen below in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Leading questions asked in the selected TV talk shows

S. No	Name of Talk show	Yes	No	Total
1	Capital Talk	8 4.12%	186 95.87%	194 100%
2	Off the Record	5 1.5%	329 98.5%	334 100%
3	On the Front with Kamran Shahid	6 3.26%	178 96.73%	184 100%

The above findings reveal that all the selected TV talk shows relatively followed the PEMRA’s code of conduct by avoiding asking too many ‘leading’ questions in their selected TV talk shows. The above findings demonstrate that Hamid Mir relatively asked more ‘leading’ questions in their programs, followed by Kamran Shahid and Kashif Abbasi. This clearly shows that though such leading questions are not in abundance in these selected TV talk shows – they are still prevailing there. It is much needed that these anchorpersons pay attention to the PEMRA’s code of conduct and avoid asking ‘leading’ questions. On the one hand, these questions inform us about the anchorperson's personal biases, and, on the other hand, it informs us about the lack of potential of such programs to inform and educate the

Pakistani audience independently about different issues.

So, based on the findings presented above, we can say that the selected anchorpersons have not stayed completely impartial while conducting their programs, but they have still performed better as one would have assumed their role.

### Political Parties’ Representations in the selected TV talk Shows

This section informs the readers about the representation of different political parties in the selected TV talk shows. It would inform us whether they provided equal opportunities to all the political parties participating in the general elections or provided the opportunity to only a few. The findings can be seen below in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Political Parties’ Representations in the selected TV Talk Shows

S. No	Name of Talk show	PTI	PMNL	PPP	ANL	APML	JUIF	MQM	PPP	Analyst	Total
1	Capital Talk	14	13	12	0	0	1	1	0	10	51
2	Off the Record	14	16	12	0	0	0	0	0	20	62
3	On the Front with Kamran Shahid	11	8	3	1	1	0	0	1	28	53

The above findings demonstrate that all the selected TV talk shows relied more on Pakistan’s three main central political parties, including Pakistan People’s Party, Pakistan Muslim League (N), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. However, all the regional political parties (both

religious and nationalist) were not given enough space in these talk shows. Thus, they were deprived of sharing their messages, manifesto, and narratives with the Pakistani citizens. The development of strong institutions depends on the free flow of information and diversity of



opinion prevailing among the public. Thus, it was much needed that these political talk shows would have given equal space to all the political parties in their programs to share their message very independently with the desired public, but it did not happen.

The findings also support that *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* accommodated more analysts/ experts in their programs than the rest of the selected TV channels. It is also significant to note that *Off the Record* also accommodated more analysts/ experts in their programs than Hamid Mir's *Capital Talk*. It informs us that *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* accommodated

more independent voices in their programs, followed by *Off the Record* and then *Capital Talk*.

### Promoting the Channel's Agenda

The researchers identified the promotion of their channel's Agenda via anchorperson by asking partial and biased queries from interviewees, doing character assassination, discussing the party's vulnerabilities, and giving less representation to some parties so they could not justify themselves. The findings can be seen below in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Promoting the Channel's Agenda

S. No	Name of Talk show	Yes	No	Total
1	Capital Talk	0 0%	15 100%	15 100%
2	Off the Record	4 25%	12 75%	16 100%
3	On the Front with Kamran Shahid	9 60%	6 40%	15 100%

In this section, the researcher investigated that 100 % PEMRA code of conduct is followed by *Capital Talk*, while *Off the Record* and *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* did not follow the code of conduct. In establishing audiences' perspectives in the socio-political environment, the anchorperson has a substantial role. The anchorperson's position is like an information-audience lifeline. The anchorperson acts as a gatekeeper who controls the ins and outflow of information.

The table shows that '*Capital Talk*' did not promote the channel's Agenda, and correct and clear implementation of the PEMRA's Code of Conduct can be witnessed in all of the 15 episodes of the Talk show. And the anchorperson did not pose biased questions, did not pass personal comments, and gave equal chances to every party's representative.

In "*Off the Record*", the anchorperson followed the channel's Agenda and 25% of biasedness was recorded during 16 episodes. For example, The Anchorperson of *Off the*

*Record* (Kashif Abbassi) shared his views that the nomination papers of Shahbaz Sharif were brought in a Helicopter, but the people were not given any relief during the PMLN government.

Similarly, in "*On the Front with Kamran Shahid*", the researcher observed that the Anchor Person followed 60% of the channel's Agenda. For instance, in his opinion, Anchorperson Kamran Shahid said that Reham Khan is a shallow lady. I have observed on many occasions that she often told lies about Imran Khan. Her book is a hard copy of 'pornography'. Preferring Dog over Reham Khan is a good decision taken by Imran Khan. The anchor tried to devalue her book, written against Imran Khan.

### Status of Language used

In this section, the researcher collected data about the status of the language used in the programs. Sometimes, the anchorperson or guest uses abusive language, which is not acceptable in our society. The findings can be seen in Table 4 below.

**Table 4.** Status of language used in the selected TV talk shows

S. No	Name of Talk show	Accepted	Not Accepted	Total
1	Capital Talk	14 93.33%	1 6.66%	15 100%
2	Off the Record	16 100%	0 0%	16 100%
3	On the Front with Kamran Shahid	8 53.33%	7 46.66%	15 100%

The above findings support that “*Off the Record*” fully followed the PEMRA’s code of conduct while *Capital Talk* and *On the Front with Kamran Shahid* ignored that. The level of language used in the talk shows has a prodigious influence on the audience of the programs. The language of both “*Capital Talk*” and “*Off the Record*” was acceptable, but in “*Capital Talk*”, only 6.66% of unnecessary phrases were used that formed a negative impression of the show. Correspondingly, the researcher examined that 100% acceptable language was used in “*Off the Record*”, But the researcher examined that the language did not hold the acceptable level in “*On the Front with Kamran Shahid*”, and the use of abusive and obscene terms and phrases by the hosts and guests in the program was also perceived. The language level was terrible, unpleasant, and irrelevant to the circumstances. For instance, in the “*On the Front with Kamran Shahid*” program, Sheikh Rashid said, “Reham Khan is a barking and sold woman”. In *Capital Talk*, PML (N)’s Talal Choudhry said that Imran Khan has an extramarital daughter.

## Conclusion

Talk Shows are considered one of the most significant genres of electronic media in Pakistan, where people gather at primetime to watch their favourite shows. But the findings based on this research study support that they failed to comply with the PEMRA’s code of conduct for better awareness of people regarding the different political issues. All of this supports that although such programs are conducted regularly on TV

channels, the need of the hour is to conduct them under the PEMRA’s guidance.

It is worrying that the selected TV talk shows only accommodate mainstream political parties’ voices and ignore the regional nationalist and religious political parties. Political TV Talk Shows should try to accommodate the voices of all the people to give more diverse choices to the people to inform themselves about the different issues and events around them. Democracy is nourished when diverse voices are included in the mainstream media to educate the public sphere.

The findings also support that the anchorpersons have asked the leading questions in all the programs, and thus they have expressed their biases. But, for the natural opinion of guests, it was much needed that they should have asked the plain question – without any twist. Furthermore, besides *Capital Talk*, the other two selected TV talk shows have also tried to promote their channel’s Agenda. It was much needed that these selected TV talk shows should have given independent commentary on the issues – without keeping in view the policy of their TV channels.

Looking at the status of the language, one is confident that they need to work on it too. It was worrying that, except for *Off the Record*, the other two selected TV talk shows on-aired a controversial language about the subjects under discussion. According to PEMRA’s code of conduct, they need to allow discussion and deliberation about the issues in a decent language. We can conclude that the Pakistani TV channels need to work more on their content to improve its quality and make it according to PEMRA’s code of conduct.

## References

- Ayesha, J. (2010). *Political Talk Shows: Are They Making Or Breaking The Country?* <https://mediainpakistan.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/political-talk-shows-are-they-making-or-breaking-the-country/>.
- Baym, G. (2005). The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism. *Political Communication*, 22(3), 259–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600591006492>
- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.
- Butt, A. A. (2016). *Role of News Talk Shows in Political Orientation of Youth of Lahore*. University of the Punjab, Lahore
- Dickerson, D. & William C. B. (1978). 'Nineteenth Century Press Critic.', *Journalism History*, 42–45.
- Dominick, J. & Wimmer, R. D. (1987). *Mass Media research: An Introduction*. Wadsworth Publishing.
- Hansen, A., Cottle, S., Negrine, R., & Newbold, C. (1998) *Mass communication research methods*. NYU Press.
- Harrington, S. (2008). Popular news in the 21st century Time for a new critical approach? *Journalism*, 9(3), 266–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907089008>
- Khali, K. M. (2012). Anchorperson: An Emerging Phenomenon in the Electronic Media. *Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism*, 02(10). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2165-7912.1000131>
- McQuail, D., Peter, G., & Els, D. B. (2005). *Communication theory and research*. Sage.
- Meijer, I. C. (2001). 'The public quality of popular journalism: Developing a normative framework', *Journalism Studies*, 189–205.
- Mittell, J. (2003). 'Audiences talking genre: Television talk shows and cultural hierarchies', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36–46.
- Siddique, R. M. S. & Rahman, B. H. (2017) 'Political Bias in Talk Shows: A Case of MQM in Local Bodies Election 2015 Farahat', *Journal of Media Studies*, 32(2), 1–36.
- Wheeler, A. H. (2010). 'Citizen Journalism and Hyperlocal Media: Building Your Brand. IV', 1-40. <https://opus.govst.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=capstones>