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Projection of Blasphemy Cases in Pakistani Media

Headings

- [Introduction](#)
- [Objectives](#)
- [Hypothesis](#)
- [Research Questions](#)
- [Theoretical Framework](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [Operational Definition](#)
- [Survey Data Analysis](#)
- [Findings](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Recommendations](#)
- [References](#)

Abstract: *The allegation of blasphemy in our society faces violent reactions by the masses and it's generally due to a lack of knowledge about legislation concerning blasphemy in the country. In Pakistan since the introduction of blasphemy law in the country from 1986 to 2010, over 1274 individuals were charged with blasphemy allegation and alarmingly over 51 were killed either before the completion of their trial or pronouncement of conviction. This study explores the role of media in blasphemy cases in Pakistan. Researcher has used the triangulation method. The researcher analyzes the content of two mainstream newspapers using the content analysis technique. For this purpose, 100 faculty members and students of mass media from different universities of Lahore were approached. Result reveals that value relation is significant for creating awareness in people who are exposed to media for more time. Result shows that more than 50% of respondents think that media fails to perform its duty as a watchdog of society. The relation between exposure to media and level of educating people on legislation is also significant.*

Key Words: Blasphemy, Role of Media, Legislation

Introduction

Media works as fourth pillar of state in any democratic society. Media as an institution has lot of responsibilities owing to a watchdog on the policies of government and also on the social issues of society. For the development of any society, it is very important that its media should work freely and without any pressure or prejudice. Quaid-e-Azam, founder of our nation, once said, “I expect the press to be fearless”. It shows that freedom of the press and independent working is not a new phenomenon even for our country. In the recent past, alleged blasphemy cases started to appear in the media quite rapidly, in last decade, many incidents happened in which masses

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turned into mob and tried to kill or most of the time even killed the alleged blasphemers. In Pakistan blasphemy means, “use of derogatory remarks, spoken, written, directly or indirectly, etc. defiling the name of Muhammad (SAWW)”. Pakistan is an Islamic state with over 95% of its Muslim population. Pakistan has several sections of its substantive and procedural criminal law (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, Criminal Procedure Code, 1898) which deals with blasphemy incidents in Pakistan thereby unleashing punishment which ranges from imprisonment to death penalty or fine or both. But in Pakistan almost 100 people have been killed extra judicially with blasphemy charges before their respective trials were over.

Media in Pakistan has rapidly grown in this millennium, acting as a fourth pillar of state and vigilantly meeting its goals as a watchdog of society but there is a sharp contrast in the role of media when it comes to blasphemy issues. Media has never been able to perform its duty in blasphemy cases as it has done in other dimensions of society. Recent example of murder of Ex-governor of Pakistani Punjab, who was shot dead by one of his own security guard in the federal capital of Pakistan. Many media groups at different times have criticized army and judiciary, those institutions which can't be criticized according to law, but media fails to talk about any betterment or practical implementation of blasphemy laws in Pakistan which would stop extrajudicial killings of alleged blasphemers.

Almost thirty years ago state pushed Islam into lives of public during Zia's regime. Fasting in Ramadan and offering prayer in government department were deemed compulsory ([Fair, 2008](#)). State in Pakistan at one time uses Islam to strengthen its regime while on other end it puts a negative effect on public in general creating an extremist and rigid mindset with self-interpreted justifications from religion.

Approach of Pakistani society in religious matters has been aggressive whether its blasphemy cartoon by Denmark based magazine [Hebdo \(2006\)](#), where millions of rupees worth property was damaged or lost due to the violent protest in different parts of country. We could see a similar situation in Lahore where a complete town was burned down after blasphemy allegation on a single family of that Christian town. Media didn't bother to report the victims due to certain undisclosed “Reasons”.

Globally media has always been an advocate of human rights and situation is same not very much different here in Pakistan but media opts for a silence for the victims of alleged blasphemy, here it is very important to mention that all alleged blasphemers who were killed before a due trial stand victim of brutality of society, because courts are the right forums to declare someone guilty on rational and legal grounds.

The major objective of this study is to identify whether media is performing its role as watchdog of society. Media pressurizes governments to provide a free and fair trial to persons accused of blasphemy. Another objective of the study is that to what extent media effectively educates people about blasphemy laws in Pakistan and how it is important on humanitarian basis to give a free and fair trial to the accused on the presumption of innocence. It is also important because such incidents put a bad mark on the face of Pakistan and give a chance to foreign media

to portray Pakistan as land of fanatics and hardliners. Third underlined objective of the study is to check to what degree minority opinion is given a chance, and how minority opinion and minorities are represented in mainstream media.

Every religion of this world somehow or other ask its follower to obey and pay respect to its notable personalities, similarly Islam the second biggest religion of the world with over 1.3billion followers and counting has always asked Muslims to respect their religion and others also. The very concept of blasphemy is not new as with the hold of church in Europe in 5th century it was mandatory for everyone to obey and follow the orders of church and those who went against those orders used to face severe punishment including crucifixion ([Pirenne, 2010](#)).

In recent times there has been a major shift in the viewpoint of European people on the issue of blasphemy, a 2008 survey conducted by Council of Europe found out that there are a few laws on blasphemy and even rare prosecutions [Lagon and Kaminski \(2013\)](#) in the article clashes of elite revealed that violence was incited and encouraged by some politicians after the speech of blasphemer Pastor in 2010 in USA and after alleged burning of Holy Quran by US soldiers in Afghanistan several deaths of US soldiers and more than 30 locals were reportedly died in riots against these incidents.

[Agis \(2015\)](#) stated that most religious restrictions were in Middle East and North Africa pre-Arab spring but even after Arab spring some of restrictions have worsened since the spring. As per report of US Human Right Department Egypt (2012), a seventeen year old Christian boy was sentenced to three year jail sentence in Egypt after his sharing of a cartoon on Facebook mocking Islam and Prophet Muhammad (SAWW).US Human Right Department Tunisia (2013) reported that a local TV producer was attacked by protesters after allegation of broadcasting a film on his TV which depict God as sacrilegious and government had to deploy hundreds of officers to separate protesters.

Blasphemy in the Light of Pakistani Laws

Literally, the word blasphemy denotes the act of profaning or desecrating the religious susceptibilities of the followers of any religion. Chapter XV, ranging from section 295 to 298C, of Pakistan Penal Code 1860 provides a broad and wide-ranging definition of the offence of blasphemy as it enumerates: injuring or defiling of place of worship with intent to insult the religion, deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs, defiling of Holy Quran, use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet, disturbing religious assembly, trespassing on burial places, uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings, use of derogatory remarks in respect of Holy personages, misuse of epithets and titles reserved for certain holy personages and places and finally the person of Qadiani calling himself Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith as blasphemous and defiling acts.

Blasphemy in Pakistan

Another example of controversial killing of Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer brings light to

the blasphemy laws in the country which prohibit any one from speaking ill or disrespectful about Islam and inflict death penalty on convicted. But the very law also provides a chance to the accused to a free and fair trial under the constitution and no extra judicial killing ([Khan, 2012](#)).

In Pakistan since the introduction of blasphemy law in country from 1986 to 2010 over 1274 individuals were charged with blasphemy allegation and critically over 51 were killed before their judicial trial was completed or they were convicted by courts. In 2014, out of total 67 stories of two leading English and two leading Urdu daily newspapers of Pakistan researcher finds out 18 stories were anti-minorities and only 14 were neutral ([Siraj, 2009](#)).

[Elahi \(2019\)](#) reported an unidentified man was arrested in Bahawalpur district in Punjab over allegation of blasphemy but around a mob of 2000 people gathered outside police station and forcibly extracted him out and set him on fire. Whereas later on police officials described man as “mentally unstable”, confused, laughing and chanting in custody. In 2012 another incident took place where a man was arrested over blasphemy allegations but later on attacked by mob and killed cold bloodedly. Alleged blasphemer was 35year unidentified male in Dadu, Sindh was arrested under 295C but mob attacked police station and forcibly dragged him out and beat him to death (Husain, 2013).

In 2012 a 14-year-old girl arrested over blasphemy law was arrested later bailed out in Islamabad but later it was proved that girl was suffering from Down syndrome and evidence against her was planted by a religious leader and she was vulnerable due to her suffering from Down syndrome (Blasphemy laws and mental illness in Pakistan (Husain, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to find the role of media in construction and representation of realities regarding blasphemy issue. Media has the potential to shape thinking patterns and structure people’s understanding. In a society with low literacy rate of 60%, the role and influence of media becomes more significant. This paper intends to highlight media coverage and treatment given to blasphemy issue. Social media is also explored because it allows greater speed, lesser expense, further geographical reach, unlimited content, control interaction, fast necessary changes, transparency and many other unknown characteristics when compared with main stream media.

The interpretation of blasphemy issue, its use and the application of blasphemy law has the potential for creating division and conflict in Pakistani society. In developing countries privately-owned media usually confronts situation where their profit motive comes into direct conflict with their information dissemination function in society.

Objectives

1. To identify whether media is performing its role as watchdog of society.
2. To what extent media is creating awareness among people about blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

Hypothesis

1. Pakistani Media is likely to give a biased coverage on blasphemy incidents.

2. Pakistani Media creates awareness in masses on blasphemy laws.

Research Questions

1. Do Pakistani media portray the minority opinion in right way?
2. To what extent Pakistani media is able to perform its duty as watchdog on blasphemy issues?
3. To what extent Pakistani media educates people on blasphemy law?
4. To What extent Pakistani media raises the importance of implementation of law?

Theoretical Framework

The most appropriate theory that goes on with the study is agenda setting theory. It was proposed by [McCombs and Shaw \(1972\)](#), it explains that media has power to influence the thinking of people. It states that how media is able to let people think about certain things in a certain way. Media is the most powerful tool of modern-day era and it can shape public opinion. In the context of under hand research Agenda Setting theory explains well that how media shapes the public opinion enabling the masses to thing in certain way along with the coverage of blasphemy incidents and other incidents. The social responsibility theory of mass media which is associated with “the Commission on the Freedom of Press” in the USA in 1949 states that media has certain responsibilities toward the society, it is to make sure that everyone should be allowed to say something unless it hurts others including the voice of minority groups in a society. SRT asserts that media must also take care of the social responsibilities toward society.

Methodology

It is an exploratory study. This nature of study is quantitative research. The researcher has used triangulation method to make the research more authentic. Data is collected through survey using closed ended questionnaire as a tool of data collection. Respondents were asked to fill a survey questionnaire which will enable the researcher to test the hypothesis which is developed on certain presumptions. In second part mainstream print media is analyzed that includes two major dailies; The Dawn and The Jang for a period of three months that includes pre and post assassination time period. Hypotheses are verified by analyzing data collected from respondents.

Population and Sampling

Population for this study is media related personals who have a better understanding regarding media role in society and who are well aware of reporting patterns of media in our society. Researcher has included media students and media faculty members from different universities as its population as they have exposure to media projection and agenda setting techniques. A total of 100 were analyzed for this study from Lahore. All respondents were part of media studies in one way or other. Researcher selected respondents from 5 different colleges and universities of Lahore to fill up the questionnaire for survey. Among these universities are Lahore Garrison University, Government College of Science and Kinnaird College for Women University and Beacon house National University.

Ethical Considerations

Researcher has undertaken all the ethical and moral concerns while completing this study. Both faculty members and students were well aware about the research and its purposes and its results. All the data was collected with the permission of respective institute’s permissions. All the results are truly and properly incorporated.

Procedure

These institutes were selected according to researcher’s convenience and with the availability of mass communication department in respective institutions. With the help of management of above-mentioned colleges and universities 100 questionnaires were distributed.

Operational Definition

Blasphemy: It means that any kind of humiliation or any kind of derogatory remarks about Holy Quran or Hazart Muhammad (SAWW).

Role of Media: How Pakistani media project blasphemy issues in country

Legislation: Laws passed by legislative assembly of Pakistan and written code and laws in constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Results and Discussions

In this section the researcher has discussed the hypothesis testing. Researcher used SPSS to analyze the hypothesis using chi-square test to find out the association between the variables.

Print Media and Blasphemy Issue

Content of two newspapers were analyzed for the coverage and direction of the blasphemy issue. The contents included news items, columns and editorials. Space in column inches is measured to determine the coverage and the contents are evaluated for helping to resolve or aggravate the issue. The graphs given below explain the argument.

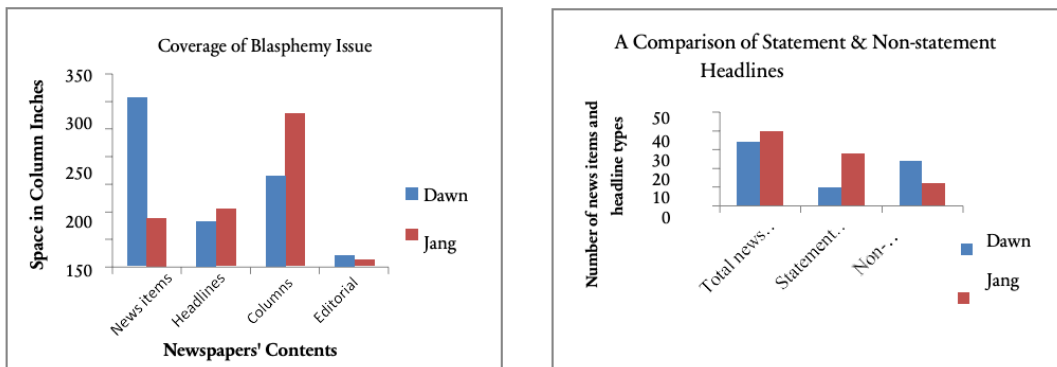


Figure 1: News items and statement and non-statement headlines

Figure 1 shows space in column inches for the coverage of blasphemy issue across different contents. The Dawn gave 306.6 column inches space to the blasphemy issue in its news items that is highest across all the other contents of both newspapers. While the Jang allocated 276.8 column inches space to the issue in its columns that is highest across all the contents of daily the Jang. Figure 1.2 shows a comparison between the statement and the non-statement headlines of news items about the blasphemy issue in both the dailies, the Jang and the Dawn. Statement headlines in daily the Jang are 70% as compared to the Dawn that is 29.4%. While non-statement headlines in daily the Dawn are 67% as compared to the Jang that are 33%. The percentages show that daily the Dawn gave more non-statement headlines which shows its objectivity and policy not to politicize the issue. Though the space given to the news items in daily the Jang related to the issue is 88.2 column inches that is less than the Dawn that is 306.6 column inches, but the headline space of daily the Jang is more than 105 column inches as compared to the Dawn that is 82 column inches. Overall, daily the Jang depended more on statement headlines hence more politicized the issue.

Newspapers contents are also evaluated for the direction and framing of the issue. The text that promoted tolerance, acceptance to others viewpoints, respect of the judiciary, disapproval of extra-judicial executions, approval for amendment and balanced approach is counted as conflict resolving text. While text that promoted blasphemy laws as sacred, quoted politicians and religious scholars’ statements denying theological debates, used adjectives to describe blasphemy laws, associated issue with political parties is taken as promoting the conflict. Following table shows the direction of contents in the two newspapers regarding blasphemy issue.

Table 1. Direction of the Contents of Dailies the Dawn and the Jang

	Conflict resolution		Conflict promotion		Other	
	Dawn	Jang	Dawn	Jang	Dawn	Jang
News Items	18	12	18	28	7	1
Columns	17	14	11	15	0	6
Editorial	3	0	0	0	0	1
Sub Total	28	26	29	43	7	8
Grand Total	66	52	58	86	14	16

Table 1 shows the direction of the various contents of the two newspapers on the category of conflict resolution and conflict promotion. Daily the Dawn “contributed more toward resolving the conflict in comparison with the Jang that got the highest score in the conflict promoting category. Daily the Jang frequently presented the issue in religious context as compared to the Dawn that framed the issue in humanitarian context.

Survey Data Analysis

100 respondents were asked to fill a closed ended questionnaire to answer questions to check validity of hypothesis. Following results were obtained about how much respondents are exposed to media.

H1: Pakistani Media is Likely to give a Biased Coverage on Blasphemy Incidents

Table 2. How much Time you Spend Watching TV?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-2hours	29	29.0	29.0	29.0
2-4	40	40.0	40.0	69.0
4-6	23	23.0	23.0	92.0
6 or above	8	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Chi Square Test for Presentation of Biased Coverage by Media

	How much time you spend watching TV?	Biased_Coverage
Chi-Square	21.360 ^a	43.040 ^b
Df	3	15
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 25.0.

b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 6.3.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
how much time you spend watching TV?	100	2.10	.916	1	4
Biased_Coverage	100	14.7600	3.35484	6.00	21.00

Table 4 shows that value relation is significant for hypothesis one. Mean of exposure to media is 2.10 and whereas mean of biased coverage of media of blasphemy incident in Pakistan is 14.76. The chi square value shows that Pakistani media is likely to give a biased coverage to blasphemy incidents.

H2: Pakistani Media create awareness in masses on blasphemy laws

Chi Square Test for role of media in creating awareness

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for role of media in creating awareness

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
How much time you spend watching TV?	100	2.10	.916	1	4
Creating awareness	100	9.6200	2.83121	4.00	15.00

Table 6. Chi Square Test Statistics

	how much time you spend watching TV?	Creating Awareness
Chi-Square	21.360 ^a	22.400 ^b
Df	3	11
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.021

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 25.0.

b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 8.3

Tables 5 represents that value of relation of media creating awareness among public who are exposed to media is significant. And mean of creating awareness among masses is 9.62 and spending time in front of TV is 2.10.

Portrayal of Minority Opinion Pakistani Media

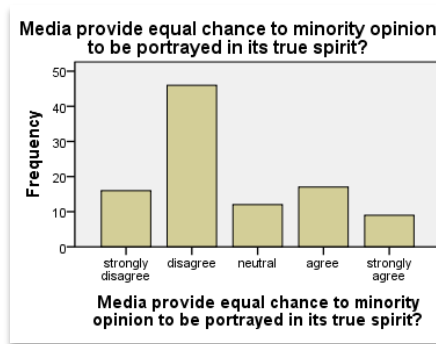


Figure 2: Do Media Provide an Equal Chance to Portray Minority Opinion

Bar chart explains how minority opinion is portrayed in media and more than 50% of respondents are of the view that media does not portray minority opinion. It gives the one sided picture and neglects the minorities.

Role of Media as Watchdog

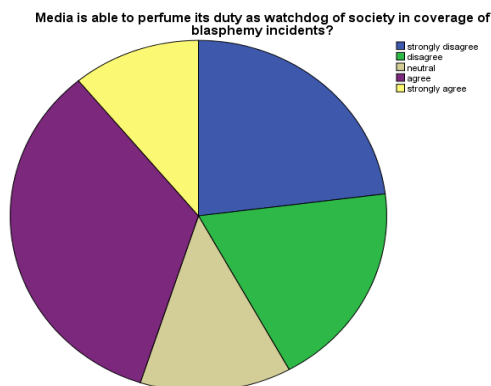


Figure 3: Pie chart explains that almost half of audience think that media is unable to perform its duty as watchdog in society in blasphemy cases.

Media Raise Awareness about Implementation of Blasphemy Law

Table 7. Role of Media in Creating Awareness Regarding Blasphemy laws

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
strongly disagree	14	14.0	14.0	14.0
Disagree	25	25.0	25.0	39.0
Neutral	2	2.0	2.0	41.0
Agree	39	39.0	39.0	80.0
strongly agree	20	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 describe that research questions three and four are valid and more than 60% of respondents think that media is performing its duty rightly in educating people and creating awareness among masses in terms of blasphemy laws in country.

Findings

The first conclusion is not expected one, mainstream media is likely to give a biased coverage of blasphemy incidents. With the mean of 14.76 of biased media coverage and 2.10 mean of exposure to media indicates that relation is significant between those two variables which means that hypothesis is accepted that media is likely to give biased coverage of blasphemy incidents. Media creates awareness regarding blasphemy law among masses is also accepted with the mean of 9.62 as compared to exposure to media's mean 2.1 and there is also a significant relation between them. More respondents think that media faces external and internal pressure during coverage of such incidents but in the meantime, media also educates masses on legislation regarding blasphemy incidents. Results also suggest that media is unable to perform its role as watchdog in the society which further suggest that media faces immense pressure from external and internal groups and religious extremist sects.

Conclusion

The main persons accused of blasphemy during most of the incidents that led to the controversy and the subsequent murder and the discussions and conflict in the society were non-Muslims, the Western media got involved in the matter. The West is unable to realize that the tension is not between the Muslim and the non-Muslim population of Pakistan rather it is between the two extreme mentalities. Any external interference can make the situation worse. The majority of Pakistanis are peaceful and moderate. Nevertheless, the tension is between the two extremist factions who are in minority. The Westernized extremist minority of Pakistanis (the secularists) always tend to ridicule religion as compared to a religious extremist minority (the conservatives) who tend to implement their own brand of religion. This tension is accelerated by the support of the US and the other Western governments. Their comments and criticism provoke their action of the others in Pakistan.

Societies develop on material and non-material features; balance between material and non-material needs is very important for the proper development of a society. Capitalist approach accelerates the process of material consumption that deals with material needs and ignores non-material needs of the society. In daily "The Muslim", Islamabad (January 8, 1995), Dr. Mohammad Waseem remarked, "Our mainstream national consciousness is characterized by anti-communism, anti-secularism and anti-Indianism; characteristics which are shared by the official circles." This consciousness gives rise to religious intolerance. Media prioritized in a capitalist system are very different and complex. But these media priorities are adopted by the Pakistani media system as well as part of the wall-to-wall globalization of the capitalist ideology. That's why the mainstream media of Pakistan that is also market driven offers news as commodity and not as public service. Educational system is divided on the issue of medium of instruction and examination with the English medium institutions catering to the affluent with teaching methods, techniques and system encourage and facilitate analytical thinking as compared to the Urdu medium institutions that usually promote cramming and rote learning.

This phenomenon is also carried over and reflected in the contents of the Urdu and the English dailies. In-depth analyses were missing in the Urdu newspapers especially the news items were loudly purveying conflicting opinions without analysis and interpretations. There was more space for headings than contents. Moreover, „he said or statement news items“ were in great number. Religion was taken as a sacred domain therefore debates were denied.

Recommendations

- Media should be able to work without any pressure and any prejudice.
- Media should give a fair chance to minority opinion and provide them a platform to express their opinion until they didn't go against national ideology.
- There should be a proper mechanism for security of media personals so they would be able to perform their duties without any threats from any religious or extremist groups.
- Media should keep an eye on the aftermath of such incidents so the culprits didn't get away easily.
- Media should propose betterment in the laws and a road map through which these laws can be practically implemented.

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