

Comparative Analysis of the Portrayal of PPPP, PML (N) and PTI in Pakistani Print Media during Democratic Tenure of PPPP

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Abstract *Media influence on politics has always been a debatable subject due to its immense potential. Media is regarded as the “fourth estate” of the nation, and the role of traditional media in the political arena is indispensable. The agenda-setting by newspapers plays a pivotal part in forming the image of a political party. This study is an exertion to examine the leading English and Urdu newspapers (Dawn, The News, Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt) of Pakistan to find out the portrayal given to PPPP, PML-N and PTI during PPPP’s five-year (2008-2013) regime. By employing the content analysis method, findings indicate that PML-N was given the maximum editorial and news coverage regarding the important national issues, whereas PPPP got the second most frequent coverage. PPPP was presented in an unfavourable manner, and PLM-N was given the least negative reportage. Results of the study revealed that English and Urdu newspapers adopted a supportive stance towards PML (N).*

Key Words: Newspaper, Political, Pakistan, Media, Agenda, PPPP, PML-N, PTI

Introduction

In the modern world, media and democracy are essentially twined together in a close relationship. Media supports democracy, and democracy allows freedom of expression to the media (Parveen & Bhatti, 2018). The media acts as a watchdog, making sure that every other institute is doing its job correctly and informs the public about the working of the ruling elite (Davis and Baran 2014). Media is powerful and influential. It possesses the potential of exerting control over the people, and that quality makes it a tool that can be used to construct or destruct social structures (Zia & Hajra 2015).

Media has transformed the world into a ‘Global village’, a term coined by Marshal McLuhan. The advent of modern technology and mass media has allowed people to be closer than ever, and it has given extreme power to media, which is used by the political elites for their own propaganda (Seaman, 2012). Pakistan’s political arena has always been a battleground with the war of words prevalent among the political parties. Media exerts its power on its audiences in a subtle way, and it leads to extensive research on media biases and its political upshots in the domain of media studies (Qadeer et al., 2017).

Print Media is one of the oldest forms of media and sources to transmit news and information. Despite the fact that we have several online portals in the contemporary world, the press still holds its importance due to its transformative and adaptive nature. The newspaper editorials shape the agenda and act as opinion

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leaders in any political debate for its readers, hence influencing their political ideologies (Bilal et al., 2012). Traditional media has always been a tool for propaganda for the ruling elite. In Pakistan, most of the newspaper content revolves around political debates, disputes, governmental issues and politicians (Siraj, 2009).

Print media is especially effective when it comes to elections. Media has the potential to influence and manipulate political preferences. In Pakistan, the media faces several allegations of political bias, and it has been evident in the past that media succumbed to external pressures and was unable to withhold its objectivity (Rehmat 2018). For the smooth working of a democracy, we need independent media as media plays a crucial role in forming the voting behavior of the citizens; therefore, media bias in reporting will bring with it severe repercussions (Ali & Rahman, 2019).

The news coverage and news stories vary from English to Urdu newspaper. Urdu newspapers are inclined towards a more wide-ranging readership while English newspapers' content is strictly regulated as its readers are usually the political elite, and it depicts Pakistan's political stance on the international forum (Shah, 2010).

Pakistan has three major media groups that include Dawn group, Jang group and Nawa-i-Waqt group. These media groups have their online and offline publications both in English and Urdu language. These newspapers have a nationwide reach and circulation in almost every part of society (Seaman, 2012). Each newspaper has a different audience, and the newspapers are aware of that fact that what their readers want to read about. So, the content and placing of news are customized for each newspaper. This study has focused on the coverage and portrayal of three important political parties Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarian (PPPP), Pakistan Muslim League- N (PML-N) and Pakistan Tahreek-i- Insaf (PTI) of Pakistan in English (*Dawn, The News*) and Urdu (*Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt*) newspapers. It has analyzed the tilt and the kind of depiction that three leading political parties got in the Urdu and English language newspapers of Pakistan during PPPP's 5-year tenure (2008-2013).

Research Questions

- I. Which political party gained maximum coverage by the English and Urdu newspapers during PPPP's government from 2008-2013?
- II. What sort of portrayal was given to PPPP, PML (N) and PTI on important National Issues by the print media of Pakistan?

The study was based on exploring the portrayal given to three leading political parties on various National Issues during PPPP's government from 2008-2013.

These issues or themes were

- A. Education
- B. Health
- C. Poverty
- D. Energy Crisis
- E. Terrorism/security
- F. Natural disasters

Significance of the Time Period

This study has covered a time period (2008-2015) that is marked important as a political breakthrough because it was for the first time in the political history of Pakistan that a selected democratic government completed its five years term without any intervention.

Relevant Literature

Media plays a pivotal role in policymaking and agenda-setting as it allows certain matters to gain more

public attention than others do. This power of media has been realized by the politicians as they compete for gaining positive attention from the media so that their voter bank may increase in number ([Dalen & Aelst 2014](#)). Media is a platform to emerge and engage with the audiences. Politicians need exposure and a medium to convey their messages to the audiences, and for that purpose, they are dependent on media to give them a platform to get in touch with the citizens ([Lozanov et al. 2011](#)).

Media and politicians are tangled in a symbiotic relationship where they both benefit from each other as media needs news material to keep their businesses growing, and politicians need media to keep up with their appearances. Media has the potential to shape and transform the decision-making process of its audiences, and it makes media a vital instrument for politicians. On the other hand, media dependency on politics cannot be ignored as the politicians are in command of the bureaucracy and thus exert control over the legalization of media laws ([Kaya & Degirmenci, 2019](#)).

In a similar study, [Rexha \(2014\)](#) stated that there has always been a multifaceted relationship between news media and politics. They both engage in rivalry and also in partnership as per their respective interests. However, politicians need media as political communication in the modern world is not possible without the help of media, either in the form of a newspaper or the emerging new media, making the instrumental use of media by the politicians an inescapable reality.

The mediating role of the media is challenging for politicians. It has changed the ways of politics, which used to be proactive in nature, but with the emerging mediating character of media, the politicians now have to maintain and develop into responsive personalities whom people want to listen to and read about ([Gurevitch et al. 2009](#)).

With the advent of new media and the internet, discussions spurred regarding the agenda-setting role of the traditional and new media. Speculations started circulating about the diminishing importance of newspapers as compared to social media. A study on agenda-setting roles of Twitter and Newspapers concluded that both the mediums are significant in setting the political agenda as Twitter is more significant in terms of breaking news, whereas newspaper has a greater impact on the ongoing political discussions and debates ([Su & Borah 2019](#)).

Newspapers are still prevalent in modern times, as it is obvious with their large readership and circulations throughout the world. Newspapers and their role in influencing voter behavior are often researched and debated in the academic sector. One such study found that the local newspapers serve as an important medium of learning and gaining information for the voters ([Kaya & Degirmenci, 2019](#)).

Media frames and shapes the political agenda that, in turn, greatly affects the politics and the voter's political affiliations. A study conducted in Pakistan found that the media had a significant impact on the voters' political inclination, and that impact was due to the framing of news by the media as it can play up or play down any news affecting its news value tremendously ([Ali & Rahman, 2019](#)). Newspaper editorials are an important part of a newspaper as they represent the newspaper's policy and its political affiliation. A study on the English newspapers of Pakistan concluded that the editorials of *The Nation* were biased in their approach as they went out of their way to criticize PPP (Pakistan People's Party), whereas *Dawn's* editorials were found to be more neutral and objective in their political commentary ([Bilal et al. 2012](#)).

The print media also has an important role in depicting the issues of conflict and national security. However, the sensitive issues should be tackled with social responsibility by the newspapers. One research that studied the print media of Pakistan, India and the United States on the Kashmir issue found that the newspapers were unable to handle that critical dispute with the maturity that was expected of them; rather, the Kashmir issue was portrayed under the umbrella of war journalism when there was a need to pacify the situation and promotion of peace ([Zia & Hajra, 2015](#)). Another study on the portrayal of Pakistan's Lal Masjid incident in the Urdu and English local newspapers established that the peace journalism was scant and the newspapers were following a very strict pattern of coercive news reporting, supporting the use of force instead of encouraging peaceful solutions ([Rahman & Ejaz, 2014](#)).

Apart from the local issues, the portrayal of international issues in the Pakistani newspapers was also put under the lens by one research, and it found that the international issues were not given the due news coverage as the newspapers publish news stories as per the likes of the local audience ([Alasuutari et al. 2013](#)).

There is a difference in approach between the English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan regarding the news selection and presentation. A study carried out to find the differences in the English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan in terms of their news coverage described that the Urdu newspapers were more aggressive in their political news stories whereas the English newspapers were moderate in their political commentary ([Shah, 2010](#)).

Urdu and English newspapers have a different approach to reporting events as well. One research study conducted on the coverage of Famine in Urdu and English newspaper reporting found that Urdu newspapers criticized the government in their news reporting than the English newspapers; however, the English newspaper editorials were more critical towards the government than the Urdu ones ([Zaheer, 2014](#)). A study that focused on the level of objectivity in the leading newspapers of Pakistan regarding the nuclear proliferation issue concluded that the newspapers presented the news stories in a manner that distorted the actual facts and was biased instead of being objective in nature ([Sadiq & Qureshi, 2010](#)).

The relationship between the exposure given to political parties by the media and their political outcomes and results is debatable. The coverage given to the political parties by the newspapers not only sets the political news agenda but also influences the policymaking process that directly affects the democracy and the working of a government. There is ample evidence that suggests that a free and fair media is a prerequisite for representative democracy ([Besley et al. 2002](#)).

The media coverage of the political news is distorted in Pakistan due to many reasons that include propaganda, bribery and use of covert or overt pressures by the state and non-state actors ([Anon, 2009](#)). The coverage given to various parties has its effects that are studied by many researchers. One such study to analyze the effect of the press and political parties on public agenda revealed that giving more press coverage to a political party did not add to the party's voter bank ([Harris et al. 2016](#)). Nevertheless, there is a major domain to be explored in the media effects in the realm of politics, and one study cannot suffice in this matter.

With the sprouting growth of media institutions and their tremendous effects on society, a new concept has emerged that studies the adaptation of media by the political parties. A study in this context explored that although media and politicians are both in need of one another, that does not make politicians any lesser than the media or the "media slaves". The study concluded that the opposition parties are more in need of media adaptation than the parties in Government ([Strömbäck & Aelst, 2013](#)).

The political elite can influence the news coverage of the political parties by the newspaper reporters. A study in this context was held in the United States, which discovered that the external and internal pressures exist on the reporters for political coverage; however, it was also found that the more prestigious news organizations were better buffered against these pressures ([Powers & Fico, 1994](#)).

In the light of the above literature, it can be established that a lot of work has been done on the relative coverage of political parties by the newspapers, the effects of political coverage on the citizens, the agenda-setting role of political communication and various factors that influence the political news reporting. Many researches in this context have also been conducted in Pakistan. However, the comparison of the coverage of PPPP and other political parties during its five-year tenure by the Urdu and English newspapers has not been explored before, making this study novel research in this domain.

Theoretical Consideration

A theory is a "set of related propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying

relationships among concepts.” ([Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 447](#)). The following theories support this research study.

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory creates a link between the coverage given to a certain aspect of news material by the media and the importance given to that issue by the public. It contends that the media focus on an event or news story makes that issue more prominent, thus setting the agenda for the public debate ([Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006](#)). In agenda setting, the media can uplift and highlight certain aspects of a news item while downplaying or completely ignoring some other facts; in this manner, the media influence the public thought ([Wohn & Brian, 2016](#)). This study has focused on the agenda-setting function of print media with reference to the leading political parties of Pakistan.

Communication Mediation Model

Newspapers are a source of getting informed on political issues on a daily basis. They act as the moderators in political communication as they transmit the news. They are in control of the coverage and the content of political news stories. As per the communication mediation model, the general intake of media information has direct effects on its outcomes that includes individual political preferences, orientations and political behavior (De Zúñiga et al., 2019). So, the mediation function of newspapers regarding political coverage is significant to study because of its various effects on the audiences.

Research Methodology

The methodology of a study guides the research process and the method to be employed for data collection ([Wimmer and Dominick 2010](#)). This research has used the quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection while employing content analysis as its method.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method that can be quantitative, qualitative or both. It is a commonly employed research method in communication studies as it categorizes and describes the media content, helping the researcher to find out ‘what lies in the content under study’ ([Berger 2016](#)).

This study has examined the frequency of coverage and tilt of the English and Urdu print media while covering the three mainstream political parties- PPP, PML-N and PTI. The study has tried to explore the sort of portrayal print media gave to the selected parties during PPP’s 5-year tenure (2008-2013). Therefore, in the context of this research, content analysis was considered to be pertinent for data collection.

Rationale for Choosing English and Urdu Newspapers

Urdu and English newspapers are the most widely circulated newspapers in Pakistan because of their language. They are affluent across all the social classes of society ([Rahman & Ejaz, 2014](#)). Thus, they provide ample evidence for comparing the news coverage of political parties.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the editorials and the front-page news stories of the leading newspapers of Pakistan. They include *Dawn*, *The News*, *Jang* and *Nawa-i-Waqt*. These newspapers are the most widely circulated and belong to the biggest news organizations of the country ([Shah, 2010](#)).

Rationale for Choosing Editorials and Front Pages of the Newspapers

Editorials are the most important part of a newspaper as they reflect the newspaper ideology and policy

towards the political environment in the country, so they are the most appropriate to be examined in the study of the political content of newspapers (Bilal et al. 2012). The front-page news stories are chosen for analysis as they are the ones that determine the importance of news. They are the most read and visible section of a newspaper, and the front page attracts the readers and buyers, so a lot of thought and importance is allotted in composing the front page of newspapers (Santo & Costa, 2016).

Findings of the Study

Coverage of Political Parties with Reference to Frequency

According to the collected data, editorial and news coverage of the selected English and Urdu newspapers on important national issues was maximum towards PML (N), having 655 (50.5 %) editorials and news stories published on it. The PPPP gained the second most frequent coverage with 604 (46.5 %), and the newspapers gave the minimum coverage to PTI by publishing only 39 (3 %) editorials and front-page news stories.

Dawn and The News gave PML (N) the most editorial coverage with 80 (53.7 %) and 29 (50 %) editorials, respectively. PPPP was the second most frequently covered political party in the editorials by the selected English newspapers with 66 (44.3 %) and 25 (43.1 %) editorials, respectively. Contrarily, *Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt* (Urdu newspapers) gave PPPP the most editorial coverage with 105 (65.2 %) and 72 (56.3 %) editorials, respectively. PML (N) remained at the second position regarding the editorial coverage of the above-mentioned newspapers with 54 (33.5 %) and 55 (43 %) editorials, respectively. PTI was the least frequently covered political party in the editorials by all the selected English and Urdu newspapers with 3 (2 %), 4 (6.9 %), 2 (1.2 %) and 1 (0.8 %) editorials in *Dawn, The News, Jang* and *Nawa-i-Waqt* respectively.

The English newspapers (*Dawn and The News*) gave PPPP the maximum news coverage with 66 (55.9 %), 130 (50.4 %) news stories, respectively. PML (N) was given the second most frequent coverage in the news with 47 (39.8 %) and 109 (42.2 %) front-page news stories, respectively. But, *Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt* (Urdu newspapers) gave the most frequent news coverage to PML(N) with 133 (65.5 %) and 148 (66.4 %) news items, respectively. PPPP got the second most frequent front-page news coverage with 67 (33 %) and 73 (32.7 %) news, respectively. PTI was given the minimum news coverage by all four newspapers. *Dawn* published 5 (4.2 %), *The News* 19 (7.4 %), *Jang* 3 (1.5 %) and *Nawa-i-Waqt* 2 (0.9 %) news stories on PTI (table I).

Table I. Newspaper and Political Party-wise Comparison of Editorial and News Coverage

Newspaper		Political Party						Total	
		PML(N)		PPPP		PTI		Eds.	News
Dawn	Count	80	47	66	66	3	5	149	118
	% within Newspaper	53.7%	39.8%	44.3%	55.9%	2%	4.2%	100%	100%
The News	Count	29	109	25	130	4	19	58	258
	% within Newspaper	50%	42.2%	43.1%	50.4%	6.9%	7.4%	100%	100%
Jang	Count	54	133	105	67	2	3	161	203
	% within Newspaper	33.5%	65.5%	65.2%	33%	1.2%	1.5%	100%	100%
Nawa-i-Waqt	Count	55	148	72	73	1	2	128	223
	% within Newspaper	43%	66.4%	56.3%	32.7%	0.8%	0.9%	100%	100%
Total	Count	218	437	268	336	10	29	496	802
	% within Newspaper	44%	54.5%	54%	41.9%	2%	3.6%	100%	100%
Total Eds. + news	Count	655		604		39		1298	
	% within Total	50.5%		46.5%		3%		100%	

Stance of Newspapers Regarding the Portrayal of PPPP, PML(N) and PTI

The results indicate that PPPP was provided with the most negative coverage on important National Issues by the Pakistani English (*Dawn, The News*) and Urdu newspapers (*Jang, Nawa-i-waqt*) with 48 % editorials and front-page news stories which had negative direction (highly negative and negative), the second most negative coverage was given to PTI which got 20.5 % overall negative coverage, and PML (N) was given the least negative coverage of 16% by all the four newspapers.

The editorial coverage of the English and Urdu print media showed that PPPP was covered in the most negative way as 70.8 % of editorials published on it carried a negative direction. The second most negative editorial coverage was given to the PTI as 70 % of editorials covered it negatively. While PML (N) got the least negative editorial coverage as 40.7 % of editorials were published on it with a negative direction.

The news coverage of the newspapers also showed similar trends. PPPP got the most negative coverage as 29.7 % of front-page news stories published on it had a negative direction. But the news coverage remained slightly less negative towards the other political parties. PML (N) was covered in the second most negative way with 3.89 % news stories, and the least negative coverage was given to the PTI, which got comparatively less negative coverage as 3.44 % front-page news stories were published on it with a negative tilt (table 2).

Table 2. Political Party-wise Comparison of Direction of Editorial and News Coverage on National Issues

		Political Party					
		PML(N)		PPPP		PTI	
		Eds.	News	Eds.	News	Eds.	News
Direction of the Highly Negative Eds. & News on National Issues	Count	21	2	39	20	1	1
	% within Political Party	9.6%	0.5%	14.6%	6%	10%	3.4%
Negative	Count	67	15	151	80	6	0
	% within Political Party	30.7%	3.4%	56.3%	23.8%	60%	0%
Neutral / Mixed	Count	41	35	32	69	1	5
	% within Political Party	18.8%	8%	11.9%	20.5%	10%	17.2%
Positive	Count	79	366	43	160	2	21
	% within Political Party	36.2%	83.8%	16%	47.6%	20%	72.4%
Highly Positive	Count	10	19	3	7	0	2
	% within Political Party	4.6%	4.3%	1.1%	2.1%	0%	6.9%
Total	Count	218	437	268	336	10	29
	% within Political Party	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Discussion and Conclusion

For the purpose of this study, the 'National Issues' represented the six of the most important national challenges, namely education, health, poverty, energy crisis, terrorism/security, and natural disasters- that were being faced by Pakistan and the whole nation was looking forward to the leading political parties regarding their policy. As far as the media treatment of these political parties on the above-mentioned issues is concerned, findings of the study reveal that PML (N) was given the maximum coverage in the editorials and news published on the front page of *Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt, Dawn and The News*. While PPPP was the second most frequently covered political party in the front page news and editorials of the selected Urdu and English newspapers. The English and Urdu newspapers showed a slight difference with one another

regarding the frequency of coverage when their editorial and front-page news content was analyzed separately. But on the whole, PML (N) turned out to be the party that got more space and prominence. In their editorial content, English newspapers, i.e. *Dawn and News*, gave the maximum coverage to PML (N), while Urdu newspapers, i.e. *Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt*, gave the maximum coverage to PPPP. On the other hand, in the news items published on the front page, the Urdu newspapers gave most of the coverage to PML (N), and English newspapers gave maximum coverage to PPPP.

While considering the direction/tilt of the selected newspapers on National Issues, PPPP was given the most negative direction in the editorials and front-page news stories published by both English and Urdu newspapers. For instance, an editorial which appeared in *Dawn* titled "The flood muddle" ([Haroon, The flood muddle, 2011, Sep 12](#)) blamed the PPPP government for not tackling a disastrous situation aptly. This news story criticized the president for enjoying a foreign trip when there was an emergency situation back at home. PTI was covered with the second most negative direction and PML (N) with the least negative direction by the four selected newspapers in their news stories and editorials.

The quantitative analysis shows that regarding the 'National issues', PML (N) was given maximum coverage in the front-page news stories and editorials of *the Dawn, The News, Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt* from 2008 to 2013. On the other hand, PPPP was at the second and PTI at the third position, respectively, regarding the frequency of news and editorial coverage of both English and Urdu newspapers.

The qualitative content analysis reveals that PPPP was portrayed in the most negative manner by the selected newspapers (*Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt, Dawn and The News*) with 48% negative coverage in editorials and news items collectively. PML (N) got the least negative portrayal (16%) in editorials and news stories. While PTI got 20.5 % negative coverage in the editorials and front-page news stories.

Conclusively, the four selected newspapers were on the same page regarding their agenda-setting for PML(N) on the theme 'National Issues' as they gave an overall supportive portrayal to the party. It might be attributed to the pro-people policies of PML (N), which were appreciated by the English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan. Likewise, the newspapers were not in consonance with the PPPP and PTI's policies on the same issues. It could also be inferred that unfavourable treatment given to PPPP was due to its presence in the office because the print media played its role as a watchdog by being critical towards the coverage of the ruling party.

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