



## Construction of Advertisements in Pakistan: How far Television Commercials Conform to Social Values and Professional Code of Conduct?

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**Abstract** *The present study examines that how far television content especially televised advertisements in Pakistan are conforming to the professional code of conduct, and social values of the society. For this purpose, the researchers selected TV commercials being telecast during prime time dramas and examined them through content analysis against the code of conduct formulated by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). The researchers focused on existence/non-existence of deception, obscenity, and stereotyping in the advertisements. They also explored that whether the level of existence of deception, obscenity and stereotyping varies from product to product and channel to channel or remains intact across the board. It was found that most of the advertisements were deceptive but a few. The element of obscenity (dress and gestures/postures) existed in all the analyzed advertisements. And as compared to ethnic stereotyping gender stereotyping was prevailing more in the chosen advertisements. The results indicate that Pakistani media are transgressing the cultural values and PEMRA's code of conduct.*

**Key Words:** Product advertisements, PEMRA, code of conduct, axiology of Advertisements, deception, obscenity, and stereotyping.

### Introduction

A media-society relationship thrives under the contours of normative underpinnings in vogue better known as normative theories scholastically (Baran & Davis, 2008). Normative theories in general advocate and profess normalcy and order in society. Likewise media functionalists view media as one of the indispensable organs of a society, which performs certain vital functions for society, and contributes to its stability and order (McQuail, 2005). In the same vein ethical theories of media, especially deontological theories, are concerned with whether media practices are in conformity with the moral duties or not. As a matter of fact, ethical norms have social origins, and they are evaluated against certain social principles and values, which mainly contribute to general wellbeing instead of specific individual interest (Ward, 2010). The value system of any culture informs people what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong and hence plays an important role in effective communication, especially cross-cultural communication (Kaminishi, Duysters & de Hoyos, 2011 p. 1343). Hence, culture plays a vital role in media content production. Similarly, reception analysts also give due role to culture in content selection, attention, And interpretation of mediated content. Edward T. Hall (as cited in Beamer & Varner, 2008, p. 29) viewed that “culture is communication” and “Communication is culture”. The potential consumers of some mass-mediated- advertised- product respond to messages which are consistent with their cultural values because culture is one of the essential factors which determine consumers’ responses to the message of an advertisement (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). On the other hand, inconsistent messages to cultural values sometimes warrant negative opinions amongst the potential consumers whereas such cynical perceptions are believed to have very negative effects on the advertised products/ services/ ideas (Treise, Weigold, Conna, & Garrison, 1994). Communication scholar De Mooij opines that advertising contents (like other media contents) are supposed to be consistent with the social values of the society (De Mooij 2005, p. 122) as any type of mass

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media content which deviates social values of the society is normally not welcomed by majority of the people of society concerned.

According to media functionalism, ethical theories and reception analysis media content, particularly the ones that are produced locally, need to be embedded in the ideological contours of the cultural landscape of the society. But contrary to these theoretical suppositions media critics are not satisfied with the media content. The object that media contents especially, advertisement contents violate social values, cultural norms, and go against the considerations of professional codes of conduct (Treise et al, 1994; Haefner, 1973; Molina & Oliver, 2013). Some media critics even claim that the advertisement contents of the mass media are partly responsible for important social problems like commodification of women, consumer deception and apathy towards minorities and vulnerable groups (Maciejewski, 2005; Chaterji, 2005).

The main areas of criticism on media advertisements are deception, obscenity and stereotyping. Advertisements, usually product advertisements, overemphasize certain traits of the products and even sometimes the products lack those characteristics. The potential buyers purchase those products and spend their money but they do not get the thing which they wanted to buy (Bari & Abbas, 2011). These incorrect informational messages persuade potential consumers to purchase such products or services (Kustura & Duman, 2012). This is tantamount to deception by the advertiser with money-making intention.

Besides the loss of money of the purchasers, this deception is also not beneficial for the image of the product/ advertiser/ the business concern. It leads to negative psychological and behavioral outcomes on the part of consumers (Romani, 2006; Akhter, Abassi & Umar (2011). According to James Haefner (as cited in Gardner, 1975) deceptive commercials make the consumers annoy but even then mass media run many such commercials that contain deceptive content. Muela-Molina and Perello-Oliver (2013) in their study on Spanish radio found that majority of the advertisements were deceptive in terms of quality of the products and prices.

LaTour and Henthorne (1994) viewed that in the West, by and large, every print media advertisement contains sex appeal and commercials have become more sex-oriented. However, this thing is not limited to Western society only. One can see that mass-mediated advertisements in Pakistan or elsewhere in the Muslim world too contain nudity and obscenity (Bari & Abbas, 2011, Akhter, Abassi & Umar, 2011)). According to Muhammad Wasim Akbar and Wajahat Karim (2011, p.95) one-third of all mediated commercials in Pakistan contain obscenity and are using female models for attraction of the potential consumers and boosting sale of the products. Alongside female models advertisements depict male models too in an erotic way (Blair, Stephenson, Hill & Green, 2006).

The use of sex-related content or sex arousing content in mass media advertisements as an ethical concern is not only a source of concern for scholars, moralists, and researchers rather empirical studies have found that the use of such contents results into negative outcomes among the readers/ listeners/ viewers of those contents (Pollay, 1986; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). On the other hand, the use of sex is not a guarantee for adoption of the advertised product. Rather advertisements without depicting sex and women as sexual objects can serve the purpose of promotion of sales of products (Cohan, 2001).

According to Akhter, Abassi and Umar (2011), the impact of sex-related content in advertisements on consumer is negative. They found that irrespective of the gender of respondents the use of indecent language, nudity, and sexist images elicited negative feelings from the respondents towards the products.

Waller's (1999) findings also suggest that the elements of nudity, sexuality, and indecency have become very pervasive in mediated advertisement contents however respondents, irrespective of their gender, view such advertisements as offensive. Moreover, the mass media are also criticized for stereotypical depictions of minorities.

Pollay (as cited in Nwachukwu, Vitell, Gilbert & Barnes, 1997) found that advertising content of mass media portray and project stereotypes. Advertisements portray women negatively. Mainly she is associated with weakness, submission, dependent, imbecile, needy and deprived (Cohan, 2001). Drumwright and Murphy (2004) are of the view that advertising content also contains racial stereotypes. Amoako (2001) in his study "Ethics in advertising: challenges in Ghana" found that mediated advertising promotes both gender and racial stereotyping. Similarly, Bardwick and Schumann (1967) in their study "Portrait of American men and women in TV commercials" study found that women were depicted as housewives, In occupational roles they were

portrayed as clerks and secretary. They were shown product representatives in commercials related to kitchen and bathroom. All such representation of women was supporting gender stereotypes. However, contrary to Bardwick and Schumann (1967) findings Vaishali Shrikhande (2003) found that the situation of women's portrayal was getting better as men and women were represented more or less identically as product representatives. However, women are still portrayed in home. Other researchers too (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Chaterji, 2006; Schaffter, 2006) found gender and racial stereotypes in mediated advertisements however, the situation is gradually changing. As compared to 1960s women are now getting comparatively better representation in USA (Shrikhande, 2003) and even in India (Chaterji, 2006; Das, 2016).

### **PEMRA and Code of conduct for advertising**

To produce advertisement content more ethically and well-netted with the social values of the society the need for a safety valve against the potential negative effects of advertisements was felt by governments and professional media organizations in different countries and hence they formulated codes of ethics for advertisement industry (Cohan, 2001). In Pakistan too Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which regulates broadcast media in Pakistan has developed a code of conduct for smooth and socially responsible conduct of television channels with respect to their contents ranging from entertainment to news, talk shows, documentary, and advertisements. The main responsibility of this organization is to make sure that no content is produced and broadcast which is deemed averse to Islamic ideology and culture of Pakistani society.

The PEMRA's code of conduct for advertisements states that:

“(1) Advertisements aired or distributed by broadcast or cable TV station shall be designed in such a manner that they conform to the laws of the country and are not offensive to morality, decency and religious sects of the people of Pakistan.

(2) No advertisement shall be permitted which promotes or supports sedition, anarchy or violence in the country; Against any provisions of the Constitution of Pakistan or any other law for the time being in force;

Tends to incite people to crime, cause disorder or violence or breach of law or glorifies violence or obscenity in any way;

Glorifies adultery, lustful passions or alcoholic drinks or the non-Islamic values;

Distorts historical facts, traditions of Pakistan or the person or personality of a national leader or a state dignitary;

Fans racial, sectarian, parochial, regional or class hatred;

Promotes social inequality, militates against concepts of human dignity and dignity of labor.

Is directed against the sanctity of home, family, and marriage;

Is wholly or mainly of a religious or political nature;

Contains references that are likely to lead the public to infer that the product advertised or any of its ingredients has some special property or quality which is incapable of being established;

Contains indecent, vulgar, or offensive themes or treatment; or

It contains material which is repugnant to the ideology of Pakistan or Islamic values.

(3) The goods or services advertised shall not suffer from any defects which are harmful to human health. Misleading claims about the goods shall not be made.

(4) No advertisement which is likely to be seen by children in large numbers should urge children directly to purchase goods of a particular brand or ask their parents to do so”. (PEMRA, n.d)

Although researchers in different studies have analyzed the contents of TV commercials in Pakistan (see for example the works of Bari & Abbas, 2011; Akbar & Karim, 2011; Akhter, Abassi & Umar, 2011) but these studies lack proper theoretical backgrounds and empirical approach. Hence an objective and systematic analysis of advertisements in the backdrop of some standardized local ethical standards was needed. Furthermore the previous studies found stereotypical presentation of Pakistani women in product advertisements so the researcher in the present study aimed to explore that whether mass-mediated advertisements, especially television advertisements portray women in the present age as she was depicted previously or her portrayal in Pakistani advertisements has changed like elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the previous studies did not investigate the

level of violation of PEMRA's code of conduct by different TV channels individually. Their results were given in a generalized way. It is to mention here that in Pakistan each private television channel has its own policy regarding content selection, production, and dissemination. Hence, in such a situation generalization of results, particularly when they are dealing with ethical and professional standards differently is itself a methodological problem. The present study was, therefore, designed to make up for these shortcomings.

The present study investigates: (1) Do television commercials (product ads) in Pakistan are deceptive, obscene and promote gender and racial/ ethnic stereotyping? (2) Do the levels of deception, obscenity and stereotyping in product ads in Pakistan vary from product to product? (3) Does the level of breach of PEMRA's code of conduct by televised ads differ from one television to another?

The PEMRA's code of conduct is mainly related to deception, vulgarity/ obscenity and stereotyping. Previous studies also focused more on these three areas. deception, vulgarity/ obscenity and stereotyping They were defined as:

### **Deception**

The researchers employed Hyman's (1990) definition of the concept of deception, which sees an advertisement as deceptive if it contains any misleading claim. For this reason, advertisements that were hiding facts due to their layout or were using misleading claims were considered as deceptive. The researcher used "misleading claims" and "hiding facts" as dimensions of the concept of deception.

### **Obscenity**

"Obscenity" was operationalized by the use of vulgar language, indecent dress, and/or body posture(s)/gesture(s) which is not considered as taboo in Pakistani culture and Islam. Hence, the construct "obscenity" is divided into, dress obscenity and postures/gestures obscenity.

### **Stereotyping**

Stereotyping here in this study means the depiction of some individual/ group/ sect/ community in the televised advertisement in the perspective of a general, subjective and exaggerated attitude, towards the individual/ group/community on the basis of his/ her gender or ethnic background.

### **Method and Results**

The population of the study was product advertisements regarding shampoos, detergents, cell phones and wireless service providers (WSP). These advertisements were placed in prime time (8-9 pm) dramas of selected television channels. The researchers used multistage sampling technique.

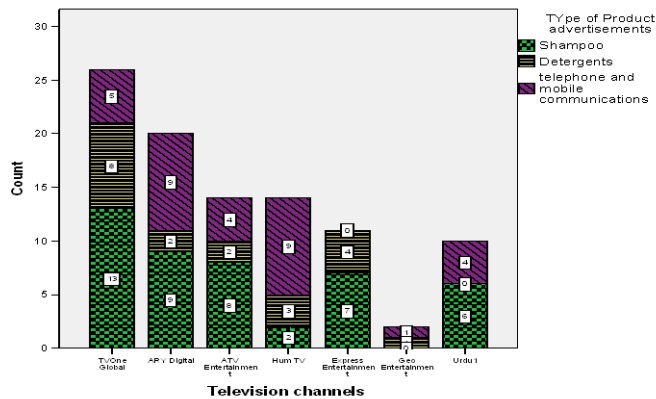
In the first stage, the researchers randomly selected some of the drama channels. These channels were: TVOne Pakistan, ARY Digital, ATV, Hum TV, Express Entertainment, Geo Entertainment, and Urdu1.

In the second stage, one episode per day from each channel of the seven channels which was telecast during 8-9 pm during one week (May 18-24, 2015) was selected. The weekly frequency of the dramas was not the same. Some dramas telecast just one day in the chosen week and some were telecast more than two days. Hence just one episode of each drama and the total number of selected episodes was 35 ( $7 \times 7 = 35$ ). Product advertisements of the selected episodes were analyzed for existence/ non-existence of deception, obscenity and stereotyping. The product advertisements were shampoo (Dove, Head & Shoulder, Lifebouy, Pantene, Sun, Clear, L'Óreal), detergents (Bonus, Surf Excel, Brite, Ariel, Express Power) and cell phones/ WSP (Q Mobile, Telenor, Samsung, Nokia, Lenovo, Rivo). The units of analysis were both verbal (spoken and written text) and non-verbal language (gestures, postures) being used in the chosen commercials of the three main products. A total of 97 advertisements were analyzed.

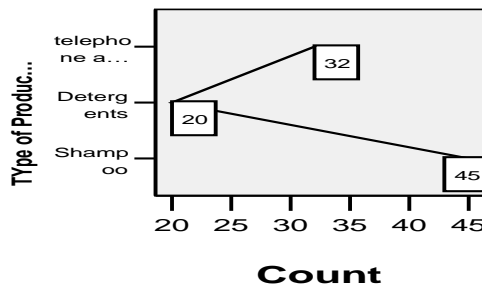
### **Product Advertisements and Television Channel**

Figure 1 shows the frequency of selected product advertisements telecast from each channel during the time period of the study. Out of the 97 ads, TVOne Pakistan telecast 26 commercials. Amongst them thirteen, eight

and five ads were of Shampoos, detergents and cell phones/ WSP respectively. digital, ATVEntertainment, HumTV, Express Entertainment, Urdu 1 and GeoEntertainment aired twenty, fourteen, fourteen, eleven and two ads in that order. ARY Digital ran nine ads of shampoos, nine commercials of cell phones/ WSP and two of detergents. Amongst fourteen product ads ran by ATV eight were about shampoos, four about WSP/ cell phones and about detergents. Out of a share of fourteen advertisements given to Hum TV nine were about cell phones/ WSP, and three and two were about detergents and shampoos respectively. Express entertainment aired seven ads of shampoos and four of detergents. Similarly Urdu1 aired six ads of shampoos, and four cell phones/WSP, while Geo Entertainment telecast one commercial apiece of detergents and cell phones/ WSP. Advertisements of the selected products per television channel.



As the figure given below shows 97 advertisements were analyzed during the stipulated time period. Out of the total, 45 were of shampoos, 32 of cell phones/ WSP Cell phones/ WSP, and 20 of detergents.



Further product-wise analyses found that amongst advertisements of shampoos there were 13 commercials of Head & Shoulder, nine each of Pantene and Dove, four apiece of Sun Silk, Clear and L’oreal, and two of Lifebuoy. In the category of detergents, 08 ads were of Surf Excel, 06 of Brite, 04 of Ariel, and 02 of Bonus and 02 of Express Power. Amongst the 32 commercials cell phones/ WSP 10 advertisements were of Q Mobile, 09 of Samsung, 06 of Telenor and 01 of Rivo while Nokia, Lenovo, and hair each had 02 advertisements.

**Prevalence of deception, obscenity, and stereotypes in television commercials**

The table given below indicates that most of the advertisements contained the element of deception (misleading claims and hiding truth). Eighty-eight percent advertisements collectively contained misleading claims while 76% advertisements were hiding truth. The table indicates that although all the advertisements were containing obscenity and stereotyping there was variation in the extent of obscenity and stereotyping product-wise as well as dimension-wise. Only 01% commercials of the selected product categories used some sort of vulgar/ indecent words whereas 60 % advertisements used indecent dress and 58% morally wrong gestures/postures respectively. Table 3 indicates that as compared to deception and obscenity, stereotyping was found the least in the studied

commercials. There were 25% of commercials that contained gender stereotyping while none of the analyzed commercials had ethnic stereotyped content.

Prevalence of deception, obscenity and stereotyping in commercials of the chosen product

Product	Deception		Obscenity			Stereotyping	
	Misleading claims	Hiding the truth	Words	Dress	Gestures	Gender	Ethnic
Shampoo	45/45	42/45	Nil/45	41/45	41/45	5/45	Nil/45
Detergents	20/20	19/20	Nil/20	Nil/20	Nil/20	19/20	Nil/45
Cell phones	20 /32	13/32	01/32	17/32	15/32	Nil /32	Nil/32
Total	85/97 (88%)	74/97 (76%)	01/97 (01%)	58/97 (60%)	56/97 (58%)	24/97 (25%)	Nil/97 (00 %)

Television channels-wise discrepancy in prevalence of deception, obscenity and stereotyping in advertisements of the selected products was also found. The Table given above indicates that as compared to other television channels, the 26 commercials of the selected product categories which TVOne Pakistan broadcast during the study period were highly deceptive, obscene and stereotyped. However, ‘word obscenity’ and ‘ethnic stereotyping’ were absent in these advertisements. ARY Digital got 20 advertisements for the three products during the same time period. Eighty percent (16/20) of them contained misleading claims, 65% were hiding truth, 69% advertisements were coded for indecent dress and indecent gestures/postures, and 67% contained gender stereotyping. None of the 20 advertisements aired during the stipulated time from ARY Digital had any obscene word or ethnic stereotyping. Although as compared to ARY Digital, Hum TV got lesser share among the advertisements these advertisements were more deceptive (misleading claims), obscene (vulgar words and indecent dress) and stereotyped (gender stereotyping) than those of ARY Digital.

All the 11 advertisements of shampoos, detergents and mobile run of Express Entertainment channel were deceptive. However, as compared to TVOne Pakistan, ARY Digital, and Hum TV obscenity was found lesser (45%) in advertisements of the selected products run on Express entertainment channel. Twenty-seven percent advertisements of the channel contained gender stereotyping while ethnic stereotyping was non-existent in all the advertisements. The table reveals that ATV Entertainment, Urdu1, and Geo Entertainment contained deception (both misleading claims and hiding truth) in their 71%, 70%, and 50 % advertisements respectively of the selected products. Table 4 also shows that 57% advertisements of ATV Entertainment channel of the selected products had the elements of dress and gesture/posture obscenity, and 14% contained gender stereotyping. The analyzed advertisements of ATV Entertainment channel did not contain vulgar words and ethnic stereotyping. Sixty percent advertisements of Urdu1 channel had dress obscenity and 50% contained gesture/ posture obscenity. None of the advertisements of Urdu1 had either vulgar words or gender and ethnic stereotyping. Geo Entertainment channel got the lesser share among advertisements of shampoos, detergents and Cell phones/WSP. It got just two advertisements. Fifty percent of Geo Entertainment’s advertisements of the chosen products were deceptive, and 50 % had gender stereotyping. They did not contain any dimension of obscenity (words, dress, postures/ gestures) and ethnic stereotyping.

### Television Channel-wise Prevalence of Deception, Obscenity and Stereotyping in Commercials of the Chosen Products

TV Channels	Deception		Obscenity			Stereotyping	
TV One	26/26 (100%)	26/26 (100%)	0/26 (Nil)	18/26 (69%)	18/26 (69%)	13/26 (67%)	0/26 (Nil)
Pakistan	16/20 (80%)	13/20 (65%)	0/20 (Nil)	12/20 (60%)	12/20 (60%)	2/20 (10%)	0/20 (Nil)
ARY Digital	14/14 (100%)	6/14 (43%)	1/14 (7%)	9/14 (64%)	8/14 (57%)	3/14 (21%)	0/14 (Nil)
Hum TV	11/11 (100 %)	11/11 (100%)	0/11 (Nil)	5/11 (45%)	5/11 (45%)	3/11 (27%)	0/11 (Nil)

Exp. Ent	10/14 (71%)	10/14 (71%)	0/14 (Nil)	8/14 (57%)	8/14 (57%)	2/14 (14%)	0/14 (Nil)
ATVEnt.	7/10 (70%)	7/10 (70%)	0/10 (Nil)	6/10 (60%)	5/10 (50%)	0/10 (Nil)	0/10 (Nil)
Urdu1	01/2 (50%)	01/2 (50%)	0/2 (Nil)	0/2 (Nil)	0/2 (Nil)	1 /2 (50%)	0/2 (Nil)
GeoEnt.							
Total	85/97	74/97	01/97	58/97	56/97	24/97	Nil/97

Exp. Ent = Express Entertainment

ATV Ent.= ATV Entertainment

Geo Ent.= Geo Entertainment

Mis Claims= Misleading Claims

Hid. Truth = Hiding Truth

Results of the study show that deception, obscenity and stereotyping were found differently in commercials or even the same product categories. However, deception prevailed more in commercials of all the three products than obscenity and stereotyping. Gender stereotypes existed more in advertisements for detergents than advertisements of shampoos and cell phones/ WSP. None of the selected advertisements contained ethnic/ racial stereotypes.

## Discussion and conclusion

The cultural landscape of Pakistani society predominantly exhibits an Islamic ideology. Islam has very clear injunctions regarding deception, obscenity and stereotyping and most of the Pakistanis conform to the Islamic ethos. Owing to this fact, one of the main objectives of the formulation of PEMRA's code of conduct for advertisements was to ensure that electronic media do not violate the Islamic ideology and cultural milieu of the country.

As per the constitution of Pakistan, legislative bodies of the country are not allowed to make any law repugnant to Islamic injunctions. Similarly, as per the Islamic teachings, deception in general and in business affairs, in particular, is not permitted. Likewise obscenity/ immorality and any kind of injustice/ inequality on the basis of color/race, and/or gender are also strictly prohibited. The Quran and Hadiths strictly forbid the Muslim merchants from adulteration or deception by any means. According to Yusoff (2014), the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) had declared those as excluded from the ambit of Islam who cheat/ deceive others, particularly customers, while selling their low-quality merchandise.

Obscenity in all forms is considered a sin in Islam. In Islam every man and woman is supposed to cover their *Auraa*. They are also proscribed not to wear any such dress or make any such posture/ gesture which can entice others or arouse their sexual desire. Here a reference to a specific *surah* of the Quran (e.g., *Surah Noor*) will validate this argument.

Islam as a religion also does not allow its followers to discriminate among people on the basis of ethnicity, race, blood, skin color, gender, etc. Although people blame Islam for the so-called discrimination between man and woman on the basis of gender, but the almighty Allah in the Quran says "For Muslim men and women, - for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, - for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward" (Quran, 33:35). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his last address on the occasion of Hujjatul Wida (Farewell Haj) clearly said no one amongst you has any preference over the others due to your region of birth, color, blood, etc. Likewise PEMRA's code of conduct regarding advertisements clearly suggests that Pakistani television channels should not run content which "promotes social inequality, militates against the concept of human dignity" and/ or it is "against the sanctity of home, family and marriage".

The results show that contrary to the teachings of Islam, cultural values of Pakistani society and PEMRA's code of conduct, deception, obscenity and stereotyping prevail in the analyzed advertisements. The results also

show that no improvement has been made over time in portraying woman as sex objects. These results indicate that television advertisements are violating the cultural values of Pakistani society, which is against the assumptions of functionalist perspective. Such results are also a clear transgression of what the proponents of media ethics expect from the media. These findings signify that advertisers' muscles are stronger than the cultural norms of the Pakistani society as well as the ethical standards set by PEMRA in shaping television advertisement content. These findings are in line with the assumptions of political-economic theorists who see elite control of economic institutions behind shaping media content, which serves their interests (Baran & Davis, 2010).



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