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## Exploring the Policies for Coverage of Minorities' Issues in Pakistani Electronic Media

### Abstract

*Issues faced by the Christians of Punjab on various occasions have been reported by the media; however, they have been on the rise in recent years. Media organizations aim to provide coverage and address minorities' issues, and also follow policies and procedures for better interest of all involved. This research paper attempts to look into the policies of electronic media organizations as well as the media regulatory body regarding coverage of issues faced by the Christians. In-depth interviews of officials in policymaking; four from media and two from the electronic media regulatory authority resulted that the authority has clear written policies for media content as to the coverage of minorities' issues which is to avoid any coverage inciting hatred or fear among people. It also brings forth media's unwritten policies and practices with regards to covering issues related to Pakistan's Christian minority and priorities given to the coverage.*

**Key Words:** Christians, Electronic Media, Media Coverage, Media Policy, Media Regulation, Pakistan, Religious Minorities.

### Introduction

The media landscape, as we know it, has changed in recent times. It is constantly shifting under the direction and whim of the powers that be who guide it according to their own agendas. Where the media is supposed to play an impartial role in guiding the public on issues and situations currently prevailing in the country, more often than not, what may be major issues for one segment of society is often underplayed as it does not suit the so-called majority opinion. [Ambreen \(2014\)](#) suggests that the way media highlights an issue, can have a negative or positive effect on the public. Media can either downplay an incident to have the minimal impact or exaggerate to such an extent so as to subsequently promote certain feelings and emotions on the media audience; feelings of hate or love.

From performing its basic functions of imparting education, information and entertainment, a shift can be seen emerging clearly where more concentration is on bombarding the screens with images and a cacophony of clashing opinions presented by “experts in the field”. In all this, a strong presence is that of content relating to political nature, and seldom does one see the plight of the religious minorities being spoken about at length. [Rehman \(2019\)](#) in his newspaper article discussed a study conducted by Institute of Research, Advocacy and Development, whereby it was observed that “the overall coverage of religious minorities in quantum terms is generally low, and the most widely available media – TV & radio – carry very little or no coverage of them at all.” This can raise a question as to what are the priorities of the media outlets, if one of their functions is to inform.

Media is not defined by truth but by perceptions and ideologies of those reporting it and institutions to which they pander. When reporting on any incident, the media takes into account the stance of the institution they represent which can either be against or in support of a specific group, their own personal angle and in many cases do not present the complete picture of events taking place as it may conflict with the majority perceptions to which they cater. [Rais \(2007\)](#) points out that religion becomes a “dangerous weapon” in such times when the religious majority groups get involved in the shaping and modification of national identity according to one major religion. Reporting on religious incidents often only presents one angle which may be a general perception but may be completely

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separate from the truth. Some ways and tools are used to generate and sustain the images we have of minorities; these explain how the media represents the minority and the reasons behind that depiction. What people think about minority groups is based on the media to which they have access and are exposed to ([Ungerleider, 1991](#)).

All over the world, the subject of minorities' representation in the media has aroused a lot of discussion and also a wealth of research. In a world where differences of religion, race, gender, ethnicity, to name a few, are creating divisions, there is a phenomenon of treating these different groups of individuals as minorities and their concern of being under-represented. In the west, media content has shown a lot of changes in media portrayal of minorities – racial minorities – over time. Moreover, several studies ([Avraham, 2002](#); [Avraham, Wolfsfeld & Aburaiya, 2000](#)) indicate that in certain countries journalistic practices have also been taken into consideration when reporting about marginalized groups, which are also influenced by socio-political environment as well as the editorial policies of a media organization.

In her study entitled “media, race and ethnicity”, [Tukachinsky \(2015\)](#) propose that the traditional media formulated the content essentially for the “white audiences”, by prioritizing their ideas and thoughts in covering their content and this would in turn further push the minorities and marginalized groups into the peripheries.

If the lens is narrowed to the situation in Pakistan, the images are not very rosy. Since the inception of Pakistan, the minority issue has slowly and gradually surfaced to the extent of becoming a serious social issue. Looking into history at the address given by the Founder of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947 to the 1<sup>st</sup> Constituent Assembly, one can see that from the very initial concept of the country it was established that there will be no discrimination against anyone, as the Quaid said,

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State”. (cited in National Assembly webpage).

In a report, “Discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan: An analysis of Federal and Provincial Laws” Rehman (2014) states that due to the religious extremism and intolerance, violence against religious minorities has escalating over time. Between 2011 and 2012 the highest numbers of violent incidences were recorded. It was also noted that since the introduction of Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860 dealing with blasphemy, there was a notable increase in registered cases against all Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians. In short, every religious minority group has suffered at the hands of the majority in multiple ways. The vicious attacks on the minorities have not been limited to individual cases, but have also witnessed mass attacks on prayer houses, religious functions and residential areas being torched by angry mobs. These attacks have carried on year after year, without any provocation from the minorities in the most part. For many of the minority religious groups residing in Pakistan, the damage inflicted upon property and self, the deaths of loved ones at the hand of the majority and heinous crimes such as rape, being burnt alive, and forced marriages under false pretenses have become but a way of life.

[Javid and Martin \(2020\)](#) in their field research in Indian and Pakistani Punjab suggest that “social life in Pakistani Punjab is marked by a paradox” – they are of the view that on both sides of the border there is stark discrimination against the minorities, or the “scheduled castes”. Though the social fabric may vary from country to country, minorities, whether religious or ethnic do undergo certain level of biases from the majority community.

[Devji \(2020\)](#) presented the same argument in his essay entitled “Changing Places: Religion and Minority in Pakistan”, but emphasizing on quantifiable numbers when it comes to defining minorities. He proposed that numbers are an important part in defining a group as a “minority” or a “majority”, and not just using relative terms. Minorities or majorities are said to belong to a specific religious group as a result of being a certain number. The former especially does not have any opinion as such and is dependent on what they are told by their opinion leaders i.e., religious leaders or political leaders. Devji further proposes that a minority to be called such is not because the group is small in number in totality; the geographical placement is of importance as well whereby a minority in a region or a country may be a majority from a global perspective.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study are following:

- Investigation of the media policy with respect to the minority community's coverage of issues in the electronic media.
- To explore the issues encountered by Pakistan's religious minorities in the last decade related to media coverage.
- Suggest way forward and recommendations for media organizations and policymakers for coverage of minority issues.

## Research Questions

- Which issues of religious minorities are highlighted by the Pakistani electronic media in the last decade?
- To what extent the policy of electronic media supports the reporting of minority issues?
- What is the government regulatory authority (PEMRA) policy regarding representation of minority issues in electronic media?

## Literature Review

Media is considered as the fourth pillar of the state, in any democracy, and helps to shape it as such. Acting as a watchdog of the people of power and influence, for the public, media ensures that the governance is smooth. This results in the media playing a very important role in bridging the gap between the common man and the powers that be. It serves to give voice to the citizens of a nation by reporting objectively and completely by representing the various cultures and beliefs inherent in any society. However, [Eide, Orgeret and Mutluer \(2019\)](#) are of the view that "it is easy for media, though, to gravitate towards the poles and relegate the much larger middle ground, initiatives towards unity or attempts at dialog, to the background."

Theoretical foundation can be seen in various studies by researchers whereby priming is used to explain the portrayals done by media, especially in news media content. Raza, Zaheer and Iftikhar (2019) have found that priming effect is activated by the majority when they are exposed to media messages about the minorities and they evaluate or judge the latter accordingly. Arendt's 2017 study of stereotypic crime news also showed that threat to social identity can influence a lot of reactions pertaining to either individuals or groups among the marginalized individuals (as cited in [Raza, et al. 2019](#)).

[Ross \(2019\)](#) in her research article entitled "Media and Stereotypes" discusses the phenomenon of stereotyping of media through various genres of media productions, especially news media, from the perspective of various western media contents. She refers to countless studies that show that media continue to produce and reproduce various stereotypical images, in this case racial and ethnic stereotypes, which eventually create harmful effects as these are the windows through which people view each other.

Review of literature on the issues faced by minorities has shown that being Pakistanis, Christians are faced with numerous dilemmas. In his book entitled "Christian Citizens in an Islamic State – The Pakistan Experience", Theodore [Gabriel \(2007\)](#) suggests that the minorities in "pluralistic democratic states" are facing a number of problems. Majority of the democratic states are aware that it is absolutely imperious to "preserve minority rights", the state should treat all minorities equally, the minorities should be able to "preserve their religious and cultural identity", they should be allowed to practice and acknowledge their religion and customs, and should be given ample chances and opportunities to take part in the political and economic spheres of the country.

Reporting of minorities by the media is an area that needs much attention. [Khan \(2016\)](#) in his research article points out that media is apparently mum on issues and difficulties faced by the minorities. There are very few incidences where media gives coverage to the minority issues. Moreover, the media scene is such where there is development in restrictions being imposed on

reporting of minorities. He also puts forth an idea that such an aggressive stance against minority reporting needs to be dealt with as an urgent issue in order to control any hostility that may arise for the citizens of the country.

[Fuchs & Fuchs \(2020\)](#) in their research article opine that a very popular opinion is that Pakistan is a dangerous place for the minorities but it stands true for many of its citizens, anyone questioning the religious status quo or diverging from majority opinion. These groups face a lot of violence and negative effects resulting from these incidents. They are also of the view that Christians are frequently targeted for being followers of their religious faith, and there is little to no facility to help them overcome or face these hostile incidences.

A project entitled "Religious Violence Project" undertaken by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom published a report, "Violence Towards Religious Communities in Pakistan", in August 2014, which presented a factsheet of violent incidents against the minorities in Pakistan. The figures given in the report stated that the overall attacks on Christians were 22, with 128 killed and 185 injured from July 2013 to June 2014 (Factsheets: Countries: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014). The incidents reported in the said document were sourced from various blogs, and very few were from the Pakistani media. This can be indicative of the fact that the media does not cover all issues related to the minorities, especially Christians, and also considers it the least of their priorities.

Mariam [Faruqi \(2011\)](#) opines in her research report entitled "A Question of Faith – A Report on the Status of Religious Minorities in Pakistan" that the media needs to give "accurate and unbiased reportage" of incidents as they happen. She also suggests that media should not look at the monetary value of its function only, but has to play a social role as well – as social role of "propagating dialogue and understanding between different religious communities and encourage peaceful relations".

[Ashfaq's \(2015\)](#) findings of research on English dailies revealed that the three newspapers under study provided adequate coverage to the event with regard to description and frequency of news. The violent actions were condemned in the news writings, and called for strict action to curb such menace. However, she also concluded that out of the three, one newspaper, Daily Times gave more coverage in comparison to the other two, even though there was consistency in coverage patterns.

Research has shown two sides of the same coin with regard to minorities' issues coverage. Some researchers found that media has given sufficient coverage, whereas others found it otherwise. [Shehzadi \(2017\)](#) conducted a research on the coverage of minority issues by electronic media of Pakistan and concluded that media does report the issues faced by minorities, but somehow it gives it an ethnic tilt. She concluded that public opinion is formed as a result of the agenda set by the media, and also suggested that media should follow ethics in reporting for the development of society.

[Chaudhry \(2020: 2019\)](#) in two newspaper articles reported of a consultative workshop held recently that media houses are condemned and criticized whenever religious minorities' issues are covered. He also brought the fact to light that a lot of times minorities are ignored in the mainstream media. If a case of persecution is in process, then the eyewitnesses have to save their lives and they are hardly given any legal protection. He also mentioned that minorities' issues are connected to specific stereotypes in the society where specifically the cases of blasphemy are mostly reported. These reports are mostly event based, as and when some issue takes place where they are the victims. On the flip side, there is hardly any coverage given to their issue on the radio, which shows that the medium does not give importance to such aspects of social life.

Minorities all over the world have faced discrimination or prejudices in one form or another, whether they belonged to a religious minority or racial or ethnic minority. Their representation or portrayal in the media also speaks of this bias. Likewise, the Pakistani electronic media portray simple social events in the form of news packages or news stories; however, violent and serious issues like mob destruction of property and religious places, blasphemy, forced conversion and marriage, and rape are being given insufficient coverage, if any at all. [Khosro \(2015\)](#) in a related study entitled "Risks: Newspapers' Representation of Violence Against Minority Group in Pakistan", indicates that research work to gauge the role of media in reporting or covering issues of religious minorities is scarce. He further states that both sides of the coin need complete and thorough investigation i.e., firstly it must be explored whether the minority image is neutral or risk inclined, and secondly what legal or societal limitations are faced by the media on providing coverage to religious minority stories.

## Methodology

In-depth interviews were used to explore the media's as well as Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority's (PEMRA) policies toward the coverage of issues faced by minorities. Although PEMRA is an independent body, all the electronic media channels have to follow laws and policies laid out by it. In-depth interviews were taken of the officials of the media channels as well as state owned channel i.e., Pakistan Television, and PEMRA as they were directly related to the work based on their knowledge and expertise. For information regarding government policies, officials i.e., Regional General Manager and Ex-Chairman PEMRA (serving as well as retired) were interviewed. From the media, Bureau Chiefs of Samaa News and HUM News, and Controller News of Express News respectively, and News Producer from Pakistan Television (PTV) were selected as they look into the news selection as well as gate keeping for their news media. The rationale for selecting the said media was that PTV is the oldest and terrestrial channel with far reaching viewership, Samaa News and Express News are among the older cable channels with a lot of viewership and HUM News is relatively new. A total of six respondents were interviewed over a period of four months and their responses were interpreted. Separate question sheets were developed for media and PEMRA officials, which were a culmination of themes based on the set objectives.

The themes that were developed for the purpose to interview were time allotment for coverage of minority issues and any policy related to it; selection criteria for minority's issues; policies of the government, media and regulatory body respectively; editorial policy and decision making for coverage of issues; journalistic practices and guidelines to media; and inter-faith harmony. On the basis of these themes, question sheets were developed for the interviews from both PEMRA and media officials respectively.

## Findings

With regards to time allotment for minority's issues coverage and related policies, all the respondents from the media gave the answer that their channel does not have any specific criteria for assigning time for coverage of issues related to minorities, nor is there any written policy by the channel. However, as and when issues happen and depending on the magnitude of the incident, coverage is given. Respondents from PEMRA answered that there is no discriminatory policy against any religious group; all are given the freedom to express their opinions and concerns, subject to limits defined by law.

For the selection criteria of news for coverage, all the media respondents said that any news related to human rights violation is covered and is given due and extensive coverage, however, one respondent added that their channel is sensitive towards such issues as blasphemy etc., but does not take the lead in breaking the news. The state-owned television PTV also follows the same criteria, which is the magnitude of any issue when it happens. The respondents from PEMRA also replied the same that the stance is neutral and any issue concerning the religious minorities is given coverage, remaining in the ambit of the law.

All the respondents had the same response to policy given by PEMRA that although the channels are independent and free to air or give coverage to issues of all segments of the society, however, nothing can be aired that is jeopardizing for the national security. In this regard the directives by PEMRA are very clear. On the other hand, Pakistan Television which follows the policies of the state does not come under PEMRA regulation. PEMRA as an independent body develops its own policy keeping in line with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and regulates only the private channels. The government can give directives but since the executive members are from the government, therefore there is no separate involvement of the government in PEMRA affairs.

The media and PEMRA respondents had the same stance for the editorial policy and decision making that the channels are free to develop their own policies for coverage of issue related to Christians or any religious minority for that matter. The editorial board for news coverage makes decisions as to how much and what is to be reported. This is also in line with PEMRA directives, as per their respondents, that there should be no coverage that creates panic or disharmony in the society. At the same time, PTV being governed by the Board of Directors, who come from various



walks of life and establishments, has a set policy as defined by the state. As a result, the self-censorship is already present where the channel knows the barriers to stay within when reporting.

While answering questions related to journalistic practices of training and reporting, the private media respondents gave the answer that there are no specific trainings given to the reporters for covering specific issues related to religious minorities. Since there is no specific news beat for religious minorities, this falls in the realm of either political, crime or religion beat, where serious issues like blasphemy or mob destruction will be covered. Reporters are given operational training where they would be taught to use a phone camera and take sound on tape, if a cameraman cannot take footage for any reason, but there is no training for sensitive issues like religious minorities and their dilemmas. Contrary to this, the state-owned channel takes extra special care with regards to how to gain information and in what manner news is reported as it can receive flak. The experienced reporters know the do's and don'ts of such sensitive issues but the new hires are given briefing beforehand. In response to guidelines for media for practices, PEMRA officials stated that the Code of Conduct is a clear guideline for all media to follow, where there are no restrictions for any religious group's coverage.

Inter-faith harmony is a concern for the media and PEMRA alike as all the respondents were in favour of it and responded that their channels and the Authority encourage and promote it. Media channels create news packages and programmes on different occasions where Christian festivals or serious issues are reported and given coverage. Pakistan Television gives extra coverage and makes news packages especially for education and health sectors respectively. PEMRA also encourages the media to develop such content to minimise hatred and negativity against religions and promotion of tolerance.

## Discussion

The data collected shows that from the media's side, private or state owned, there are no priorities or policies for covering Christian minorities' issues in terms of allotting time for coverage. The issues are prioritized only if they have news value. [Mubeen and Qusein \(2016\)](#) suggest in their study that "private television channels provide unbiased coverage to minorities of Pakistan and have also been successful in creating awareness about minorities' issues among the public." Even though so many incidents have taken place such as Peshawar Church attack in 2013, mob attacks on Christians' homes in 2013, blasphemy case on Aasia Bibi in 2010 etc., ([Yousaf, 2016](#); MRGI, 2014) where Christians were targeted, there are no specialized reporters to cover minorities' issues only. These are divided among various beat reporters like crime, politics or religion. This also reveals that although in the Pakistani population there are many religions as well as religious sects, there is a lack of special beat on religion. This falls under the domain of either crime, or politics primarily, and is covered by such reporters only. However, certain media houses prefer to send a Christian reporter to an incident relating to Christians, in order to get maximum coverage. Another reason for this is that a Christian reporter would find it easy to get maximum information from the relevant people and victims or respondents would be more forthcoming.

PEMRA as the regulatory body doesn't interfere with the channels and their operations, however, clear directives are that anything that is against the national security must not be covered. This was also reported by a newspaper, The Express [Tribune \(2016\)](#), that PEMRA "took notice of airing provocative content allegedly aimed to target a religious minority by two private television channels." With regards to ethical and unethical practices, channels are wary of the biases that their reporters may or may not have, and take these into account when assigning reporting assignments.

From the side of regulation, it was revealed that Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has given clear directives regarding coverage of news to the channels. The Authority operates by a Code of Conduct which is provided to all the channels by way of which they can function effectively. The Code of Conduct addresses various situations that may arise and facilitates in avoiding any untoward incident by the media houses. As stated in the Code of Conduct 2015, "the licensee (broadcaster) shall ensure that the programs aired by it do not contain any derogatory statement or visual which is likely to lead to bias, hatred or disharmony with reference to any religion, sect, community or ethnic group" and "no program or comment is aired which incites or condones

acts of violence and encourages violation of law in the name of religion, sect, community or ethnic group or any other pretext". The aim is not to air any such content which creates disharmony or fans extremist views, nor is there any hate speech for any religion.

The Authority has given a free hand to the media to cover the news, while remaining within the parameters set by it, whereby "the licensee will ensure that hate speech by any of its employees or any guest in a program is not aired." The media is encouraged to address issues of concern; there is no restriction that minorities' voices should be suppressed. On the contrary, [Bukhari \(2015\)](#) in her comparative study of analyzing the Urdu and English print media headlines of two Pakistani newspapers suggests that media places considerable weight on their own ideological perspectives when showcasing social and national issues. The slant of a headline defines the article and acts as a quick interpretation of information for those who do not read the entire details. Electronic media lacks in the field of research in this particular issue. Lack of representation of minorities in the mainstream media has led to a feeling of neglect by the state when news events are not given extensive coverage.

Rais (2007) has rightly pointed out that in spite of facing so much discrimination; the voices of the Christian minorities have not landed on the ears of the powers that be. It has therefore become incumbent for the media as well as the government to ensure proper and effective coverage of minorities' concerns so as to allow them to voice their grievances.

## Conclusion

The study aimed at exploring the policies for coverage of minorities' issues in Pakistani electronic media. The Christians in Punjab, Pakistan are faced with many discriminatory issues over the last many years. The incidences have been covered by the Pakistani electronic media occasionally; however, under the same premise there have still been many times when certain issues did not appear on the media. The media channels as well as the government regulatory body have various policies and procedures in place; nevertheless, the incidents remain on the rise from one year to another. As a policy matter, PEMRA has clear directives with regards to news coverage, which are that nothing must go on air that creates hatred or disharmony among the citizens of the country. With regards to the media, their own internal policies do not spell out any prioritization for minorities' coverage, whereas some do have sensitivity for the latter's issues and their depiction on media.

In entertainment media and news media, the minority representation is next to none. In the entertainment media, rarely any role is of a religious minority. In news media, events pertaining to the minorities are reported, but they are never given more time and space as are received by other news. The plight of minorities in Pakistan is increasing day by day, with religious persecution to life threats. None of these get much time on air. Research has been conducted to gauge the representation in print media and a little in electronic media. However, extensive research is still lacking as to addressing the minorities issues which are on the rise.

Christians being a part and parcel of the society and contributors to the development of the country in every aspect need to have that sense of belonging. This can only be done when the media and media policy makers will come forward and address their concerns.

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