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# Media Freedom for the Loudest and Powerful Media Owners: Neo-Liberalism A Threat to Media Freedom?

## ABSTRACT

*The study is a content analysis of editorials, opinion articles, and letters to the editor of two English and two Urdu dailies Dawn, The News, Jang, and Nawa-i-Waqt from 2007–2012 to explore whether Pakistani press promoted the responsible role media needs to play in society or the emphasis was on freedom of the press only. In the context of neo-liberal policies and wake of deregulation of electronic media in Pakistan, findings show that there is a significant difference in the coverage on media freedom and media accountability. Print media corporations hardly held themselves accountable for the violations of media ethics; advocated absolute media freedom, and completely marginalized the concept of media accountability and its social responsibility role. It argues that as media is enjoying libertarian heritage, they have the concomitant responsibility to use the freedom for the well-being of the entire society and devise self-*

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*media accountability mechanism before the much acclaimed freedom of the press is controlled by some external forces.*

***Keywords:*** Media accountability, Pakistani Press, social responsibility theory, press freedom.

## ■ Introduction

**M**edia has crucial role in the contemporary society as it shapes our opinion, values, loyalties, interpretation of the world and beliefs in a particular direction (Cissel, 2012; Hazir, 2010; Kieran, 1998; Pritchard, 2000&Sani, 2005). Unfortunately, till recently media corporations' business ventures have successfully been hidden in the context of neo-liberalism and the public policies concerning the media contents were construed as state censorship, infringement on the individual choice. The deregulation of media is considered to be part of market competition. And so freedom of the press has become freedom for the people who own it. Media is considered to propagandize and promote the interests of those who finance it and have their own specific agenda to advance. Media freedom has become a tool in their hands and they manipulate it (Herman& Chomsky, (1988).

Proponents of neo liberalism in every country argue that barriers and regulations harm freedom of speech and inhibit the ability of nations to develop their competitive media firms. There are often strong commercial lobbies within nations who work for opening of the borders than for maintaining trade barriers. The focus of neoliberal polices is to invariably call for a commercial media and make communication markets to be deregulated basically means a call for 're-regulation' to serve corporate interests.

Due to this powerful role of media in the backdrop various questions are raised whether media is playing its role responsibly in the society or not and if not are they suggesting any mechanism for the media accountability. It is generally argued that powerful news media corporation use their own and other media outlets to market power and cultural resources. The loudest proponents of media freedom are often the most powerful owners of media corporations who lack adequate media accountability systems. They are therefore, strong advocate of the notion that any form of regulation on the press is a restriction on press freedom. They don't lose any opportunity to stress that any form of press regulation would be fatal to democracy and would lead to totalitarianism.

It also argued that power of media corporations is closely linked to their market-industrial or economic power (Granham, 1986). This consolidation of media in few hands has minimized and marginalized content diversity and quality (Austin, 2011). The concentration of ownership and owners commercial interests have resulted in irresponsible media coverage. It is argued that media corporations have political agendas and seek political influence. They often violate media ethics to generate sales revenue. As private enterprises they strongly disapprove of any government interference in their business, hence, they are strongly opposed to any law that impinge on their business models. Privately owned media corporations play on the concepts of 'free speech' and 'freedom of the press' to meet their own political and commercial interest. Economics dictates the decisions of the media organizations hence quality of media content and media ethics are compromised in this competitive environment of audience demands regarding

media content on one hand and economic benefit on the other hand (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The notions of press or media freedom are routinely invoked in highly politicized and commercial ways. The expansion of media industries is closely tied to the discourses on press freedom, and it is argued that owners' motivation to assert for freedom to report are strongly motivated within the market-liberal business. Bagdikian (2004) argues that from 1983–1992 the major corporations who owned media in America has reduced from 50 to 20. Currently, 'Big Five' control most of the information, and shape audience taste, opinion and attitude.

Hence the corporate media controls the news media which otherwise should be the place of criticism and discussion of media policy in a free society. The track record is that the corporate media uses their domination of the news media to serve their own interest in many countries. They tend to dominate their own national and regional markets, and hence the discussion on media accountability is dominated by media freedom.

What needs to be questioned is that why the unfettered right of the media corporations to press freedom discourse be not under any scrutiny and to mechanisms that should ensure effective news standard and quality content in a democracy; as any other large scale capitalist enterprise is subject to scrutiny and accountability at the consumer level. As McQuail (1997) succinctly also argues that "potential crisis of media accountability to society, meaning essentially a breakdown in the systems by which the media have been led or constrained in the past to put the interests of society on a par with their self-interest" (p. 513).

Contrary to this, in Pakistan limited literature exist with regard to media accountability. However, now there is a growing interest in media accountability both within industry and academia, but still media accountability in Pakistan is a dream yet be full filled.

## ■ Media Accountability

The growth of news media accountability systems has made term media accountability popular in the world (Bertrand, 2008b) and there is an extensive body of literature available (for instance, Bardoel&d'Haenens, 2004; 2013 Bertrand, 2000; Elliot, 1986; Dennis et al., 1989; Kolachi, 2013; McQuail, 1997; McQuail, 2003; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000; Rasul& Jennifer, 2013; Shaukat; Petersson et al., 2005).

Media accountability as a concept has originated from responsibility. If media is free and powerful then it has to play a responsible role towards the society and if it fails to do so it should also be held accountable.Krogh(2012) argues that "media accountability evolved as a concept in the 1940s, originating from demands for social responsibility for the media with implied threats of government activity" as an accountable media will enjoy credibility among the masses besides protecting profession's integrity as a whole (Plaisance, 2000). McQuail defines media accountability as "all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for quality and/ or consequences of publication" (McQuail, 2003, p.203).

However, Hodges distinction brings clarity in this fluid concept: The issue of responsibility is: "to what social needs should we expect journalists to respond ably". The issue of accountability is: "How might society call on journalists to

explain and justify the ways they perform the responsibilities given to them" (Hodges, 2004, p. 173) Hence, according to Hodges responsibility deals with defining proper conduct, whereas accountability with compelling it. Furthermore, Pritchard in his book *Holding Media Accountable* stresses that the "media accountability is the process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents" (Pritchard, 2000, p. 2). In Pritchard's viewpoint, a constituent may be an individual, group, or an organization which is concerned with media performance (ibid.).Similarly McQuail (2003, p.19) asserts that "accountable communication exists where authors (originators, sources or gatekeepers) take responsibility for the quality and consequences of the publication, and orient themselves to audiences, and other affected, and respond to their expectations and those of the wider society".

Claude-Jean Bertrand, who is considered to be the father of media accountability, defines the concept as "any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public" (2000, 108).Krogh (2008), in the light of the definitions put forward by scholars like Pritchard, Plaisance, McQuail, Hallin and Mancini defines media accountability as:

Media accountability is the interactive process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of (and sometimes a correction and/or excuse for) their activities to their stakeholders. The values and relative strength of the stakeholders vary over time and are affected by media systems and media technologies (p.27).

The Society of Professional Journalists (1996) in America introduced a new chapter to their code of ethics under the heading "Be Accountable". According to this:

"Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct, encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media, admit mistakes and correct them promptly and expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media"( Society of Professional Journalists,1996).

In the opinion of Pritchard (2000) media accountability may be defined as the extent to which media institutions may be expected to give an account of their action and behaviors to their audience. Likewise, media accountability is a process whereby media practitioners accept the responsibility for the consequences of their actions and become receptive of public requirements and demands of the society (Elliott, 1986; McQuail, 2003). Furthermore, Christians (1989) contends that his "argument is designed for the overwhelmingly majority of media practitioners who realize that media entails responsibility and who wish to exercise their responsibility through forms of self–regulation" (p. 39).

## ■ Pakistani Media Context

Media and political system go hand in hand. The political system in which media operates determines the extent of freedom which it enjoys (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). Throughout the history of Pakistan, media freedom has been very fragile owing to military regimes and non-democratic behavior of the elected governments (Iqbal & Khan, 2008; Niazi, 1986 and Robinson, 2002). Hence, the question of media freedom has remained dominant

discourse. But, a lot has changed since the evaporation of state monopoly over Pakistani media and subsequent freedom in 2002 gave rise to powerful media enjoying plurality and freedom. However, the increasing commercialism and concentration of ownership in a few hands is also responsible for abusing media pluralism and freedom as it was envisioned (Herman& Chomsky, 1988; Rasul & McDowell, 2012). Therefore, media critiques, now, argue for media accountability in case media is not responsibly performing its role within the society.

At the time of creation of Pakistan there were no chain papers, but with the passage of time, and particularly after 2002, liberalization of media landscape in Pakistan the ownership concentration has consolidated. After post 2002 and mushrooming of news TV channels, media started enjoyed the status of fourth pillar of the estate. This meant media's transition from a period of direct and indirect censorship to a fairly free press along with the trend that political and commercial interests started playing a key role in shaping news content. And when government agreed to loosen its control over the electronic media at the beginning of the century more than two dozen television channels emerged on the scene.

This also gave rise to battle for survival for television companies and lead to an ugly competition for viewership ratings to get a bigger share of relatively small advertisement budgets. Media concentration of ownership in Pakistan has expanded in the last decade, consequently, few media groups grasp monopoly over almost all information

(Kolachi, 2013; Rasul& Jennifer, 2013 & Shaukat, 2013). Of course this gave rise to more sensationalism and decline to serious news. in Pakistan Independent Media Corporation,

Waqt Media Group, and Pakistan Herald Publications, are the main media giants which enjoy monopoly over information and revenue(Rasul& McDowell,2012) and these powerful elite and few groups control media content (Mosco, 2009; Djankov, McLeish, Nenova, & Shleifer ,2011). Leading newspapers like, Dawn belongs to Pakistan Herald Publications is being published before the creation of Pakistan. It also includes Monthly Herald, Aurora and Spider magazines, The Haroon family which owns it, belongs to a prominent scion of the Memon community, who has made fortunes in clothing and sugar trade, is considered to enjoy unmatched influence in country's political and business arena. The News and Jangare publications of Independent Media Corporation which is Pakistan's most powerful and widely read newspapers. The Corporation also owns Weekly Mag and Akhbare Jahan, and dailyAwam, Daily Newsand Waqt from Karachi. Apart from the Geo news it also owns Aag, Geo Tez, Geo super, Geo Khani and Geo TV. Mir Khalil urRehman was the founder of the group and now his son Mir SakilurRehman is the head of the business house, who also has major investments in the national and international share markets. Daily*Nawa-i-Waqt* owned by Waqt Media Group claims to be the custodian of Pakistan's ideology, also owns English daily, The Nation, magazines namely Family, NadaeMillat, Phooland TV news channel Waqat. The media organization which once used to be limited to a single newspaper now own not only chain papers but also television networks. These three media groups are considered to have a major influential role in shaping people's opinion in Pakistan.

## ◼ Media Accountability in the Pakistani Context

The debate on media accountability is new in Pakistan and has gained more significance due to deregulation of electronic media in 2002 and its emergence as vibrant media. Since mediahas been deregulated, it has emerged as powerful institution in the Pakistani political, social and cultural scene. It is alleged that sensationalism has replaced serious journalism. It is argued that under the garb of media freedom, private media in Pakistan frequently abuses freedom and whenever, voices are raised against the unethical behavior of the media practices, media protests and construes it as curtailment of their freedom.

In many cases political and commercial interests play an important role in the selection and framing of news and concepts of media ethics and self-regulation are set aside. This trend is more apparent in television than in newspaper and it would not be an understatement to say that media ethics or media regulation are completely ignored in the country.

Many times media has come under strong criticism for not playing it role responsibly. The five hours live of hostage episode of Sikandar along with his family in the Blue area of Islamabad in 2013, when many channels featured headlines stating that the man had held the entire city hostage, leaving the police helpless and the citizens horror-struck. Another alleged gang-rape case of 17 year old victim UzmaAyub came under strict public scrutiny when she was hounded by journalists in her house and hospital, narrating her experience of abduction and gang rape- to reporters and shown to millions of viewers again and again. Likewise, the live coverage of two brothers, Mughees and Muneeb, beaten to death in front of crowd of people and in the presence of

members of District Police has raised very important questions about the current mediaaccountability mechanismin Pakistan.Today's media environment interest in media accountability is increasing over the years (Krogh, 2008) and Pakistani media is no exception to this interest and demand; people are now demanding codes of ethics with enforcement provisions.

The current media accountability mechanisms whether they are media industry wide like Council of Pakistan Newspapers Editors (CPNE) Code of Ethics, All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) Code of Ethics, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) Code of Ethics,Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) Code of Ethics or government backed Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and Press Council of Pakistan (PCP) have failed to effectively hold media accountable. The codes of ethics introduced by these bodies even do not have accountability related provisions and are very vague.

The question is why did media ignore the regulatory or monitoring systems that they themselves had created? Is it because of lack of effective self-regulation system, or because of the monetary gains of the media owners and editors? Bigger dilemma is that are these violations unintentional or are they reflection of a deeper malady which has its roots in the manner in which the media industry of Pakistan has taken a shape in the last couple of decades. Authors argue that if the media does not monitor its work and does not go for self-accountability and understands its role as an institution which has to play its role responsibly and continues pursuing its commercial interest blindly, advocating media freedom without any accountability

mechanism, there is a danger that the much acclaimed media freedom might be sabotaged by external forces.

In this context this study tries to examine whether media corporations in Pakistan has given more prominence to press freedom discourse and marginalized the concept of media accountability or not. Critical analysis of this trend is necessary to reflect and work for strategies of media reform.

*RQ1: Is the coverage on the issue of media freedom more than media accountability in the print media of Pakistan?*

*RQ2: I s there a difference in the coverage on the issue of media accountability between English and Urdu press?*

## ■ Method

The study considers editorials, columns, and letters to the editor of two English and two Urdu dailies *Dawn*, *The News, Jang, and Waqt-i-Waqt* from the period of January 2007 till December, 2012. Taking into consideration the nature and significance of the present study and for the fear of missing few articles which deal with media, researchers studied every unit of the population during the period. A total 8724 newspaper issues were explored for the purpose of this study.Media scholar Claude-Jean Bertrand has explored about 110 diverse ways to hold the media accountable in practice (Bertrand, 2002). He categorizes them into, internal, external and cooperative measures. The various media accountability mechanisms like opinion article, media critique, letters to editor, any media forum which criticizes media performance all constitute media accountability mechanisms.  This study has focused on three of them i.e., letters to editor, editorials and columns. It is a content analysis of any editorial, column,

and letters to the editor which referred to the performance of the media.

Media content was categorized into media accountability, and media freedom. Any article on the failure of current regulatory mechanism, lack of accountability in case of violation of ethics, need for a new accountability mechanisms like, Press Commission/Council, presence of Ombudsman in the media houses to make media accountable is coded as media accountability while any article dealing with government censorship, ban on certain media groups, threats to journalists and media groups, obstacles faced for gathering information are grouped under media freedom category. Totality of impression is used to assign the content into established categories.

## ■ Media Accountability Coverage in Pakistani Media

Out of 8724 newspapers only 245 news articles (Editorials, columns and Letter to the Editor) related to media accountability or media freedom, in which 94(38.3%) were Letters to the Editor, 44(18%) Editorials and 107 (43.7%) columns (Table 1).

First research question dealt with the coverage on the issue of media freedom more than media accountability in the print media of Pakistan. Findings show that out of the 245articles, 186 (75.9%) were on media freedom; whereas 59 (24.1%) were on media accountability. The chi square value $\chi^2$ (2, N=245) =9.029, p < 0.011; Cramer's V=.192, p< 0.011, show that there is a significant difference in the coverage on the issue of media freedom and media accountability in the print media of Pakistan (Table 1).

***Table-1: Newspapers' Content Comparison with Categories during 2007–2012***

| Categories | | |
|---|---|---|
| Media Content | Media Accountability | Media Freedom |
| | f (%) | f (%) |
| Letters to Editor | 21(22.3 ) | 73 (77.6) |
| Editorials | 4(9.09) | 40 (90.9) |
| Columns | 34 (31.7) | 73 (68.2) |
| Total | 59 | 186 |

N=245 Ed= 44   Col= 107   Letters to the Editor= 94

$\chi2$ (2, N=245) =9.029, p<0.011; Cramer's V=.192,p<0.011

Findings in Table 1 also clearly show that there is a significant difference in the editorial coverage on the two stances. On media freedom out of total of 44 editorials 40 (90.9%) as compared to only 4(9.09%) editorials were on media accountability show that newspapers' did not take the issues of responsible media very seriously. The number of editorials on media freedom show that print media as an institution has not given importance to media accountability and reflected media organizations and owners commercial centered approach towards the issue (Bagdikian, 2004). Likewise, out of 107 columns only 34(31.7%) were on media accountability and 73(68.2%) were on media freedom.

It is argued that Letters to the editor on media accountability show growing awareness among the masses for media accountability and their desire to hold media accountable for its actions to make its function more credible (Plaisance, 2000;Pritchard, 2000). One expected that more space will be given to media accountability in Letters to the

editor, but the situation is no different, out of 94 Letters to the Editor 21(22.3%) addressed the issue of media accountability and as many as 73(77.6%) were on freedom of the media. Press did not even give the readers a fair chance to view their point of view on media accountability. Interestingly, the articles dealing with media accountability were only for electronic media and none for print media.

Second research question dealt with the difference in the coverage on the issue of media accountability between English and Urdu press. Of 245 editorials, columns and Letters to the Editor, English press published 149 (60.8%) whereas Urdu Press published 96 (39.2%) on the two issues. A total of 59 articles were on media accountability in the dailies of both languages and 186 were on media freedom. On media accountability 36 (65.5%) articles were published in English press and 23 (24%) in Urdu press; whereas media freedom coverage was 113 (75.8%) in English and 73 (73 %) in Urdu press respectively (Table2).

***Table-2: Bilingual Comparison with Categories during 2007–2012***

| Categories Media Content | Media Accountability | Media Freedom | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *f (%)* | *f (%)* | *f (%)* |
| Urdu | 23(24 ) | 73 (76) | 96 (39.2) |
| English | 36(24) | 113 (75.8) | 149 (60.8) |
| Total | 59 (100) | 186 (100) | 245(100) |

$\chi2$ (1, N=245) =71.626, p < .000; Cramer's V=.541, p< .000

Findings show that though English dailies gave more coverage to the two issues both English and Urdu press gave more coverage to media freedom as compared to media

accountability, there is no significant difference in media freedom and media accountability coverage in Urdu and English press.

## ■ Conclusion

The results of this study support the studies that claim that media generally talks less about accountability and its main focus is on media freedom and related issues. Pakistani Press in the selected period has given more coverage to media freedom than media accountability. The emphasis on the importance of media freedom was apparent and the coverage on how media needs to be accountable to the society was marginalized.  Neoliberalism which refers to policies that call for business domination of all social affairs with minimum interference from anyone is reflected in the way coverage on media accountability issue was given. The trend to have minimum activities that might undermine the media rule of business was quite apparent. The coverage, relegated lack of enforcement provisions in case of violation of media ethics (Christians, 1985-1986).

The insistence on absolute freedom as advocated by the press in Pakistan, raises many questions about the role of media in the Pakistani society. If this absolute freedom means only 'freedom from' and ignores socially responsible and ethical media, there is a danger that eventually public's confidence may be shaken in the credibility of the media. Theoretically speaking when media behaves in an irresponsible manner, and keeps only its commercial interest in view, then some external forces have to step in to hold media accountable for its performance, for they view that self-regulation by media is not a regulation and media must be regulated by some external bodies (Katuj, 2013).There are

voices in Pakistan in this direction as well. However, there is no consensus on this issues still how to hold media accountable in Pakistan, whether internally or through some external means.

However, if the trend not to hold media accountable continues and media owners and editors do not hold a self-regulation and media accountability mechanism there is a danger that external media, regulatory mechanism might become operative and the freedom of the press, a result of a very long struggle, might be jeopardized. The impending need of the hour is that media should not avoid its role as a responsible institution of the society for its own commercial and economic and political interest, but take charge of its accountability itself. It is argued that if the media of this country is to flourish as a responsible tool for disseminating information it can earn the respect of the readers and viewers, by evolving a multi-tier regulatory system. Apart from adopting an effective voluntary codes of ethics based on nationally and internationally recognized codes it also needs to devise an internal system of attending to complaints. Media owners and editors need to recognize the importance of an internal ombudsman or Reader's editor.

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**Appendix**

**Coding Book**

| Categories | Categories Descriptions |
|---|---|
| Media Accountability | Articles concerned with the failure of current regulatory mechanism, lack of accountability in case of violation of ethics, need for a new accountability mechanisms like, Press Commission/Council, presence of Ombudsman in the media houses to make media accountable |
| Media Freedom | Articles concerned with government censorship, ban on certain media groups, threats to journalists &media groups, obstacles faced for gathering information |
| Tribute to Journalist | Articles which highlight the contribution of individual journalists to the field of media, achievements, sacrifices |

**Codebook Definitions**

Newspaper: The daily newspaper in which the article appears
Article Type

*Column*: An opinionated article, usually written by a columnist and labeled as a column is on media accountability and freedom.

*Editorial*: A piece of article which is written by the editor or someone who is assigned to write this piece of writing on media accountability and freedom.

*Letter to editor*: Any piece of writing which is written by readers in the newspaper pertaining to media accountability and freedom.