

The Weight of Words and Limit to Freedom of Expression: A Journalists' Perspective in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Freedom of Expression is one of the most widely protected and debated constitutional right. It can be traced in almost all parts of the world. When it comes to guarding basic rights and especially with respect to freedom of expression it is also protected in Pakistan's constitution. The Article 19 of Constitution of Pakistan defends the right to freedom of expression of its citizens but freedom of expression is still not being a cherished idea in Pakistan. Therefore, this study is designed to understand the factors influencing the freedom of expressions in Pakistani media. This study also aims to investigate the role of pressure groups in curbing media freedom of expression. To fulfill the purpose of the study, survey method is used, 100 Lahore based Journalists who are working in electronic media are selected through simple random sampling. The responses of the journalists are analyzed under agenda setting theory. This study concludes that Pakistan media is not working freely. Journalists in Pakistan agree that they face restrictions from pressure groups. According to them, Military and political groups are the strongest pressure group that influence the freedom of expression in Pakistani journalists. As this research points out the impact of pressure groups on media content and also indicates that how media content is mold according to the perception of pressure groups.

Key Words: Freedom of Expressions, Journalists, Agenda Setting, Policy Setting, Media Content & Pressure Groups.

Introduction

An independent republic ever since the end of British Rule in 1947, Pakistan has a well-developed constitutional jurisprudence and commitment to constitutional values that sit alongside deep-rooted cultural, societal, and religious norms that

affect freedom of expression. It is also vital part of constitution of Pakistan. As mentioned in Pakistan's Constitution of 1973:

Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, or incitement to an offence. (Pakistan Const. art. 19)

However, this right is not absolute in Pakistan and the state has imposed restrictions on it. Freedom of expression is considered the backbone of the democratic process and the first condition of liberty in every society. It is also said that "freedom of expression is the mother of all liberties" (Liaquat, Qaisrani, & Khokhar, 2016). On the other side of the table, even in developed countries, freedom of expression is restricted and the major causes behind these restrictions are clashes with other values or rights and with legal consents or with social criticism. According to Amnesty International (2019) the political activists and journalists in Pakistan were targeted and penalised under draconian laws, including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), the Anti-Terrorism Act, and sections of the penal code on sedition and defamation. The government managed to curtail media freedom and many media workers stated that they experienced censorship, coercion and harassment by the authorities (Pakistan, 2019).

Freedom of expression in Pakistan has been facing challenges in the past years. According to the report published by Press Freedom Barometer (2018) that there were around 150 violations against the journalists and media workers in the country. The violations included officially imposed censorship, either written or verbal threats, murder, harassment, arrest, abduction, unlawful confinements and physical attacks, usually conducted by the state and non-state actors, political and religious parties. At least 157 cases of attacks and violations were reported in Pakistan between May 1, 2017, and April 1, 2018, across all four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, KPK and Baluchistan) Islamabad and tribal areas. That's an average of about 15 cases of violations in a month (Chronicles of Shame, 2018).

All around the world, it is not perceived as an indisputable right, as each majority rule government has built up some arrangement of restrictions regarding the opportunity of the right to express freely. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, constraints on the ability to speak freely are forced especially when the right to speak freely of discourse clashes with different qualities and might be dependent upon lawful approval or social judgment, or both (Van Vollenhoven, 2015).

Many of the researchers highlighted the importance of freedom of expression almost in every country but some factors/pressure groups work as a hurdle for

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freedom of expression and media. These groups try to prevent the media from covering several issues or solicited them to change the dimension of the issue in favor of these groups.

Like many other democratic countries in the world, Pakistan guarantees the freedom of expression except specific restrictions regarding national security, sovereignty and Islam. This study intends to examine the situation of freedom of expression in Pakistan and also investigate the factors that influence the journalists' right to express in Pakistani media. In the recent years some political leaders raise an issue that media is controlled by some non-state actors and also pressurized by the officials. Some other studies also criticized the ban on different news channels in recent years and also authorities' ban the speeches of political leaders. In recent years, some of the mainstream anchors of different news channels have lost their jobs due to clash with the management on program content. That is why this study attempts to find out the impact of pressure groups on freedom of expression in Pakistani media. These media houses attempt to contend with these pressure groups, at that point they need to confront numerous troubles in the light of transmission boycott, devastating their property, and threatening journalists when they broadcast anything against these gatherings. In this investigation, it aims at sorting out how these factors influence the journalists and media houses.

The study investigates the factors that affect the freedom of expression in Pakistani media and their impact on the right of expression on Lahore based journalists of electronic media. This study refers to explore state and non-state actors which influence the duties of journalists and operate as a pressure group for media houses.

Research questions

In order to evaluate the impact of pressure groups on freedom of expression in Pakistani media and the factors influencing the journalists, the research questions in the study are

1. What are the factors that do affect freedom of expression in Pakistani media?
2. What are the effects of pressure groups on Pakistan's news media?
3. What are the tactics and strategies that pressure groups use to affect media in Pakistan?

Literature review

Speech is God's blessing to mankind. Freedom of speech and expression is in this manner a natural right, which an individual gets on birth. The idea of such an opportunity is to have the chance to speak and express one's thoughts and opinions

openly without restriction. But at the same time, the constitution of different countries like Pakistan and its neighboring country India give more priority to the promotion of national security and sovereignty. It is needed to be a little careful in our responses that offend our liberal sentiments (Raza, 2016). According to Liaquat, Qaisarani, and Khokhar, (2016) the right to speak freely of discourse/opportunity of articulation is a confirmation to citizens to take an interest viably in the working of the majority rule system. The biggest challenge in different countries is to ensure the balance between the freedom of expression and law and order in the country to control the violence due to diverse views. Multiple factors are adding to the current status of issues regarding the opportunity of articulation. More often, it is limited through strategies like restriction, narrow legislation, the killing of journalists, and other people who voice their opinion. Different strategies are crackdown on religious minorities and repress free ideas and religious opinions. Therefore, it is a need to suggest a thorough review of laws related to the regulation of freedom of expression to bring them in harmony with the constitutional assurance of freedom of expression. Today's modern world has also once witnessed the harshest pressure groups in the name of society sanitization. Liberals joined conservatives to root out communists and then liberals were thrown out by conservatives. Similarly, comic book critics attacked horror publications. Courts also played role in limiting the freedom of expression. Moreover, the government finds ways to intrude private lives in the name of society sanitization. This all collectively affects journalistic practices and societal liberty to express views (Blanchard, 1992).

It has been observed that Pakistani press always remained vigilant before partition and after partition on the issues of masses. Media always raised voice against the dictatorial regimes in Pakistan. There are many instances when civilian and military governments imposed such laws that curbed the freedom of the press (Shah, Basit, & Azhar, 2017). The government in Pakistan also proved itself as a very strong pressure group. For instance, Press and Publication Ordinance (PPO) by Ayub Khan in 1962, Revised Press and Publication Ordinance (RPPO) promulgated by Zia in 1980, tug of war during Nawaz government between Jang group and government, Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance (PCPO) in 2002 by Musharraf, and Gillani's government's conflicts with media are some eminent examples of political pressure groups in Pakistan. These political pressure groups in every regime tried to dominate media coverage as per their own interests (Hussain, 2011). Most of the media laws were introduced under the regimes of the military in Pakistan. Media laws were never debated in the national parliament. The establishment also uses media power to change public opinion according to their interest. This is also true that free flow of information is dependent on the journalists' sense of security and capacity to deal with the threats of state and non-state actors (Mezzera & Sial, 2010). The political environment of the country is the most influential factor that restrains media freedom in Pakistan as perceived by the working journalists. According to Ashraf and Shabbir (2019), the political environment restricts editorial autonomy at different levels. Major factors of

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dominant political environment include state subsidies, unequal distribution of ads, political favoritism, use of Right to Information (RTI) tool, hidden benefits to journalists, government advice, and political threats.

Nisar, Muhammad and Khan (2018) added that journalists have been assaulted, threatened, kidnapped, injured, and even violently murdered in the line of duty and the situation is still the same. Financial constraints are also being used by the pressure groups to hinder, mold, modify, or quietly stopping coverage of news (Eijaz, Rehman, Ahmad, & Butt, 2014).

Democratic norms and media freedom are frequently abused by pressure groups for their stakes (Levitsky & Way, 2002). The activity of laws relating to blasphemy (Pakistan Panel Code, 1860), the Defamation Ordinance (2002), and the Official Secrecy Act (1923) have become the instruments of media concealment (Jabbar, & Isa, 1997). Pakistan is positioned as one of the most insecure countries for working journalists, just about 42 journalists were killed in 2010 with association with their work (Pakistan deadliest nation, 2010). Journalists have additionally been insinuated by military and intelligence authorities for revealing the administration's debasement or military activities (Signs of Change amid Repression, 2011).

In another study, Jamil (2018) also highlighted that Pakistan has a reputation for having courageous and vocal media. Measurements accumulated by universal associations observing press opportunity and savagery against writers in Pakistan uncovers that dangers to their lives and mistreatment by the military, intelligence agencies, and militant organizations have "stayed high" lately. The examination adds that news coverage is a risky calling in Pakistan as a result of physical, mental, social, passionate, and point-specific dangers, which compel writers' entitlement to the opportunity of articulation and influence them most while doing their routine work. Similarly, Hassan, Malik and Hussain (2017) stated that the threats are real and are being evolved too by various interest groups i.e. Taliban, militants, terrorists, politicians, criminals, religious, ethnic, intelligence agencies, state machinery, and media owners targeting not only the life and property of working journalists but also their families too. The ugly situation and gloomy scenario have brought Pakistan to the 5th most dangerous country of the world for journalists and media persons (Shah, 2010). South Asian press society and Pakistan Press foundation claims that Pakistan is the most unsafe place for a newsroom in South Asia. Threats and killing of journalists by the unknown is another big issue of journalists in Pakistan. Wali Khan Baber, Abdul Razak Baloch, Ali Sher, and many other journalists were killed by unknown during the job. First, they threaten by unknown call and then they gunned down or kidnapped (Ahmed, 2019). Similarly, a study by Aslam (2015) shows that assassination attempts, conflicts, interests of big brothers, limited access to Right to information, lack of proper training do also cause pressure on Pakistani journalists. Fear of losing livelihood and life are equally contributing as a pressure factor to hinder the

journalists to meet the need of their journalistic role. Complex political system and anarchy in a region may also lead to various kinds of threats to journalists. Khan and Yousaf (2019) also concluded that journalists face threats while performing their duties which contradicting the concept of freedom of expression in Pakistan.

Journalists, who cover cases such as corruption or other governance evils, have to face organized crimes against them. They become victims of powerful elites and governing bodies. Additionally, non-state actors such as terrorists are also posing serious threats to journalists. These hurdles are being faced by not only the full time journalists associated with media houses but also by the citizen journalists, online journalists, and community media workers. Moreover, need of the conflict-zone and non-conflict-zone journalists differ greatly (Badran, 2017).

Journalists also have to do self-censorship due to political pressure, religious intolerance, feudal system, and military involvement. According to a report by CPJ, 52 journalists killed in Pakistan from 1992 to 2016, 42 war correspondents, 28 journalists murdered from 1992 to 2013, 46% of journalists lost their lives in the war-zones (Alam, 2016). Media face Censorship and suppressed by military dictators through a different ordinance, sanctions, draconian laws, banned on media shutdown media houses, and publications. Religious leaders proclaimed blasphemy laws that restricted freedom of expression, intelligence services managed media, and journalists and civil bureaucracy control media through administration (Duffy, 2016; Khan & Ahmed, 2017).

Freedom of speech also does not exist in Baluchistan. The job of journalists in this part of the world is full of dangers and risks. Many journalists are killed , hundreds of them have received threat calls and dozens of them have been abducted in this area of Pakistan. Baluchistan has become a very dangerous province due to target killings, zone, sectarianism and military operations etc. Those who dare to report, have either lost their lives, kidnapped or detained. Many of them have left journalism profession to save them and their families. The government is not playing its role to protect the journalists from these pressures (Tahir & Niaz, 2016). Journalists in Tribal areas of Pakistan are also facing several pressures. They may face threats, warnings, and even kidnapping or killing in worse scenarios. Particularly, militant groups' pressure on the journalists of the tribal areas is prominent. For instance, covering any issue related to Tehrik-e-Taliban is risky for the journalist in the tribal areas. This problem of these journalists in Pakistan is recognized worldwide (Riaz, 2015).

It has been observed that journalists prefer to self-restrict while communicating their perspectives and investigating issues like religious minorities, Qadyani or Ahmadis group, Blasphemy laws and ethnic questions (Saeed & Rafique, 2019). Religious extremism is also one of the most important restrictions in Pakistan. Religious parties work as a pressure group in Pakistani media and journalists cannot speak openly on religious issues because people become violent if they see anything against their beliefs. The impatience level in Pakistani society is increasing day by day and that is why Pakistani media cannot talk freely on religious issues.

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Theoretical framework

Media plays an important role to set the public agenda related to an issue. The pressure groups kill the right of freedom of expression and pressurize the media houses to change their content as they need to fulfill their interest. In this way, they try to manipulate the minds of the public through media and try to achieve their interests. That is why the theoretical framework for this research is the agenda-setting theory. Where the elite class use media to change the mindset of the public and pressurize the policymakers to make such policies that are helpful to these factors.

In this research, the main focus is to establish the relationship between the pressure group and freedom of expression in Pakistani news media. These factors try to force the media to convey such information to the public that was good for these pressure groups and try to make their agenda as a public agenda. This study discussed the policy agenda settings which are set by elites through media. The pressure groups that affect the freedom of expression do pressurize the media to work according to their interest. That is why we are taking agenda-setting theory because pressure groups work for their interest and they want people also to think according to their agenda.

Research methodology

In this research survey method is used to understand the viewpoint of journalists. The population of the study is comprised of journalists of news media working in different media outlets of Pakistan. A sample of 100 respondents is selected through random sampling from the different media outlets of Pakistan who have access or a part of the system of news that is conveyed to the public. The criterion for selecting the respondents is that the respondent should be a part of any news organization. The questionnaire of this study is based on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire consists of close ended and pre-coded questions, which formed under the light of pressure groups of media.

Findings, interpretations and discussion

This study revolves around the impact of pressure groups on freedom of expression in Pakistani media. For acquiring the answers of research questions a survey was conducted. The sample of survey is based on journalists. 100 respondents working in different media outlets filled the questionnaire through Google forms. This section discusses the findings derived from the survey. Out of one hundred respondents, eighty-nine (88%) are male and eleven (12%) are female.

Is Pakistani media operating freely?

Is Pakistani media operating freely?

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	12	12.0%
Strongly Agree	6	6.0%
Neutral	13	13.0%
Disagree	51	51.0%
Strongly Disagree	18	18.0%

On responding to the query that, does media in Pakistan work freely? Out of 100 respondents, 12(12%) agreed, 6(6%) strongly agreed, 13(13%) responded as neutral while 51(51%) disagreed and 18(18%) strongly disagreed. In this table majority of the peoples feels that media is free in Pakistan.

Do Pressure groups/censors ask for unfair favor?

Do Pressure groups ask for unfair favor?

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	58	58.0%
Strongly Agree	20	20.0%
Neutral	16	16.0%
Disagree	4	4.0%
Strongly Disagree	2	2.0%

On responding to the query that, do they (Journalists) think that pressure groups ask for unfair favor, 58(58%) agreed, 20(20%) strongly agreed whereas 16(16%) responded as neutral. On the other hand, 4(4.0%) disagreed and 2(2%) selected the option of strongly disagree. This table shows that the pressure groups force the media for getting unfair favor for their interests.

Demand by pressure group for dissemination of fake news

Demand of False news dissemination by pressure groups

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	47	47.0%
Strongly Agree	11	11.0%
Neutral	26	26.0%
Disagree	13	13.0%
Strongly Disagree	2	3.0%

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On responding to the query that, do they (Journalists) think that pressure groups demand of false news dissemination to divert public mindset, 47(47%) agreed, 11(11%) strongly agreed whereas 26(26%) responded as neutral. On the other hand, 13(13.0%) disagreed and 3(3%) selected the option of strongly disagree. This table shows that majority of the respondents feels that pressure group force media to disseminate false news.

Pressure group stops media from covering issues

Pressure groups stops media from covering issues

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	61	61.0%
Strongly Agree	24	24.0%
Neutral	10	10.0%
Disagree	4	4.0%
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0%

On responding to the query that, do they (Journalists) think that pressure groups refrain media from covering an issue, 61(61%) agreed, 24(24%) strongly agreed whereas 10(10%) responded as neutral. On the other hand, 4(4.0%) disagreed and 1(1%) strongly disagreed. This shows that pressure groups force the media to broadcast false news.

Freedom of expression is one of the most important fundamental rights of an individual. Freedom of expression not only empowers the individuals but also empowers the decision-makers to know the diversity of opinion from the public. Freedom of expression is directly related to the media houses because they have to talk on the behalf of every citizen and the media workers have to deal directly with this right but some factors try to pressurize the media to achieve their interests. The journalists need to confront dangers for not covering a specific issue or incidence. Likewise, religious pressure groups ruin the proper inclusion of socially or locally savage exercises. On the other hand, the establishment molds the content as per its interests. To wrap things up, media administrative offices likewise lead to concealment of the opportunity of articulation somewhat in any case. This study is conducted to find out which pressure groups affect the freedom of expression in Pakistani media.

The results depict that the journalists believe that media is not operating freely in Pakistan and they have to face some pressures during their work. In this study the majority of the people agreed to the results that pressure groups do affect the freedom of expression in different ways like they have to face societal issues like security and threats from unknowns, high officials, state and non-state actors etc.

On responding to the question that which pressure group affects freedom of expression in Pakistani media, 12 % of the total respondents believe that corporate sector affects freedom of expression, 6% believe that religious and moral censor restrict journalists while 36% respondents view political pressure groups as one of the biggest causes to limit freedom of expression for journalists in Pakistan. Similarly, 40 % respondents believe that the political and military establishment is another factor that do influence journalistic practices.

Moreover, 78% respondents show their agreement that pressure groups do affect in providing and taking undue favors to journalist for securing their interests. Almost 58% respondents believe in this. In addition, majority of the journalists feels that pressure groups stops media from covering certain issue like corruption and their personal scandals etc., by using their powerful resources and influence. In the overall study, it was observed that pressure groups have the strong impact on freedom of expression in Pakistani media through different ways and democratic norms and media freedom are frequently abused by pressure groups for their own stakes.

Conclusion

This research is an attempt to understand the viewpoint of Pakistani journalists regarding freedom of expression situation in Pakistan. The basic purpose of this study is to comprehend the status of freedom of expressions in Pakistani media and also to analyze the factors that affect the rights of journalists to work freely. The findings conclude that media does not operate freely in Pakistan and pressure groups do influence media content. Pressure groups ask favors from media and also disseminate news according to their own interest. Majority of respondents believe that military and political pressure groups as most influential pressure groups. Keeping in view the agenda setting theory, this research also confirmed that pressure groups mold media content according to their interest to change the mindset of public. In nutshell this study indicates that media in Pakistan is not free and pressure groups have power enough to persuade media houses collectively and journalists individually.

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