

Conditional Influence of Media: Media Credibility and Opinion Formation

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between media usage, credibility, and political opinion formation among educated Pakistani youth. The relationship is studied under the premise that as trust plays an important role in many all areas of social life, it will influence the opinion of the audience. Following the same logic the study proposed that trust in media would facilitate media's effectiveness in formation of opinion. Findings show that the in heavy viewing of TV news channels does not have any relationship with the way people perceive the credibility of the channels and it also does not affect the opinion making process, the perceived credibility of the media is a more important factor in the formation of political opinion.

Keywords: political opinion; media credibility; media exposure

Introduction

Over a period of time in a democratic society, news media seems to have established itself as an important requisite of public debate and opinion. People formulate perceptions about people, societies and nations on the basis of the information audience receive from the media (Lippman, 1922 cited in Stockwell, 2006). Scholars argue the opinion making and meaning making depends on the quality of the content of the news in the media, which in turn also affects politics and political opinion (Robbennoltl & Studebaker, 2003; Chan A. 2007; Robinson, 1976 Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007;:). Number of studies testifies that when media coverage is slanted it has a strong influence on people's opinion. (Entman, 2003). The media are expected to have considerable potential for influence on the opinions of individuals by providing the information on issues and indicating the options. By publishing opinion poll results or by stating editorially what public view is on a given topic, they add another element of potential influence (McQuail, 2010). Although number of studies and contemporary observations testify that mass media has a strong influence on people, there are also other researches, particularly experimental studies, which show that mass media does not have a strong power to change the attitude of people (Hoffman, 2007; Avery, 2009). Even the agenda setting theory (Baran & Davis, 2000) and Spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974 McLeod; Kosicki & McLeod, 2008) though

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advocate a powerful effect of media is only limited to the effect that it changes the perception of the audience of what the majority of people might be having an opinion on an issue but not necessarily changing their own opinion on the same issue.

Similarly, audience maybe using media for information but it is not necessary that in their attitude or opinion making, news media is playing an effective role (Garrett, 2009). It is argued that the influence of news media in making opinion is conditional to individual's prior political orientations (David, 2009), medium through which they receive news, their own alternative news sources, interaction with the discussant group (Weimann, Tustin, Vuuren, & Joubert, 2007) political efficacy or trust they repose in the news media.

The effects of media are also mitigated by interpersonal communication of individuals who have a high level of political understanding of matters (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). The political discussions irrespective of the exposure to any media was found to be stronger predictor in influencing the people knowledge about politics (Eveland & Thomson,2006) . Likewise, political interest and partisanship is considered to be stronger predictor of strong political knowledge than newspapers and TV news (Feldman & Price, 2008). People are also generally found to be skeptical about the news emanating from the traditional three media channels. The relationship between interpersonal discussion on news and perceptions of news credibility is found to be moderately negative.(Kioussis S. , 2001).

According to McQuail (2010) expectation of finding proof of causal connections between media and opinions and attitudes are much lower than earlier days. According to Hoffman,(2007) opinion formation process is not a linear one; it is a very complex and dynamic one. The process of opinion formation involves multiple factors like political dispositions, media use and interpersonal communication along with perceptions of community opinion. There are many factors whose presence or absence affect the chances of media effects, such as, the perceived authority, legitimacy and credibility of the source (Stockwell, 2006) consistence of content of media messages; attachment and loyalty to sources apart from motives for attention to media, congruence of content with the existing opinion or belief, amount and quality of attention paid, skill and appeal of message and presentation and support from personal contacts and environment.

Studies on media effects also show that as consumers are not passive beings, the previous political dispositions of individuals moderate the influence of the messages emanating from the media. Individuals general attitude towards an

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issue compare to media news, has a more significant part in their opinion making (Brettschneider, Mair, & Mair, 2003).

Interpersonal political conversations can exert a stronger influence on voting decision and mitigates the influence exerted by political information from mass media (Schmitt and Beck, 2003; Garrett, 2009; Boer & Velthuisen 2001).

Interest in the credibility of media channels began in 1930s when the credibility of the newspaper was challenged by radio news in the Second World War. Which was further carried out during 1950s when competition from television compelled researchers to see which news media had greater credibility in the eyes of the people.

Interestingly there have also been researches to investigate the difference between medium/channel credibility and source credibility. Researches indicated that people distinguish between medium credibility and source credibility (Kiouis,2001). Source credibility focused on the characteristics of the message sender or individual speaker. However media credibility included concepts like believability and trust, fairness, and accuracy (Bucy, 2003).

According to McQuail's typology of factors affect on opinions and attitudes, one is the perceived authority, legitimacy and credibility of the source. There has been a number of researches showing that news media is losing its credibility as a trustworthy source of information (Bralley, 2010). The influence of media on opinion formation are also mitigated by number of variables such as source, content, channel, receivers and destination(McGuire,1973). Stockwell(2006) in his study tries to establish that the messages that stem from a credible and authoritative source are relatives more effective in influencing the opinion than those sources that are more attractive or more close to individuals. The effects of priming and agenda setting are also seen to be weaker amongst those who perceive media to be less credible source of information (Miller and Krosnick, 2000). Whereas, in the study of Wanta & Hu in 1994, while examining three audience attributes in the agenda-setting process findings support their model that media messages effects individuals who perceive media to be very credible and hence depend on the media for information and hence they expose to media more this also increases the agenda setting effects on them.

The confidence of the public in the media has decreased over the last decade. (Kiouis, 2001; Meyer, 1988; Gaziano, 1988). In a comparative study between online and traditional media, online media is considered to be more credible than the traditional media amongst politically-interested web users (Johnson &

Kaye, 1998) . However, to study in media credibility in an experimental study , conducted by Bucy in 2003, results have also indicated that perceptions of network news credibility are affected by the use of channels. The credibility of the news channels was enhanced when it was used more consistently. Likewise, Rimmer & Weaver, in 1987 findings try to establish that the credibility of the news media has less to do with the exposure but media choice measures are linked to higher media credibility ratings.

This discovery of the mistrust in the media has intrigued the scholars to look into the consequences of this mistrust on the audience. Media skepticism also affects the perception of the opinion making climate (Tasfati, 2003). However, there is scarcity of studies that investigate the interaction of the audience mistrust of the media and news messages. The gap exists because media credibility is not used as a covariate in researches in building media effect theories.

Television is most highly consumed medium in Pakistan and is the dominant means of information in Pakistan. From the year 2002 the state relaxation in issuing licence to privately run TV news channels in Pakistan. The state run Pakistan Television network (PTV) mainly terrestrial TV broadcasting was challenged by new privately run satellite and cable channels. This boom in channels was also encouraged due to increase in the revenue through national advertising. Since 2002, these channels have been opening new dimensions to social and political information. An average Pakistani is now more informed of his constitutional and political rights political and constitutional rights and well aware of the events and issues in other countries. Though it is said that electronic media was liberalized to counter the influence of Indian media , the media became a strong outlet to challenge the authoritarian Pakistani government behavior. The open and bold debates on these TV channels became more and more critical about the corrupt practices of the government. The popularity of these channels increased day by day and hence a rapid growth of TV news channels in Pakistan. The boom in Pakistan's electronic media also led to the popular belief that there is a significant influence of news channels on public opinions and attitudes. However, there is no significant empirical research to verify this popular belief. This study examines the relationship between the trust reposed by the audience in the news media and the influence of news media on the audience political opinion. This is an empirical study to explore whether the Pakistani electronic news channels have an effect on audience political opinion making.

This study explores if there is relationship between the high exposure to television to news channels and political opinion formation. The paper looks into the issue that even if TV channels are popular sources of information and

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people watch them regularly does it have any influence on the opinion making of the audience. It also tries to explore whether there is a relationship between the media as a trustworthy source of information and opinion making. The notion that individuals are more influenced by the source of information on whom they have trust is also looked with reference to media. The paper explores how much does the trust in the media influence the opinion making process of the audience. The variables of age and the educational level are controlled in the study. This is done by taking only the university students as its population.

Theoretical framework

Media systems dependency theory as put forward by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1976), states that the influence of media on the individuals cannot be studied in isolation as there are strong links of media and individuals with the large social systems. According to this theory the relationship between media, audience and social systems are linked together. Theory propounds that the characteristics of individuals and the social environment are factors that influence their cognitive behavior and their media use.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach integrated large number of media research mostly through lab and survey research and challenged the 'general theory' that media has a powerful effect on the audience. Their theory focused on the interaction between media institutions and society at large. They suggested that the kinds of effects that occur cannot be detected in laboratory, experimental setup and recommended that it is more useful to regard the entire social setup within which the media works for "media do not exist in a vacuum" (p. 257).

The proposition is that audience need to learn is not solely met from their immediate environment, and hence media is sought to meet their need to get more information. Hence, an use of media extensively for information augments the dependency of the audience on the media. The basic proposition of the media dependency theory is that more people rely on the media to fulfil their need to acquire information more important will media become in their lives and therefore the effect of media will also increase.

Though the Media dependency theory advocates that the influence of media increases when there is more dependency on media for information, the effect of the media needs to be understood in three way relationship 'between the larger social system, the media's role in that system, and audience relationships to the media" (1975, p. 261). They suggested that to understand the basis of media influence what needs to be looked at three way

relationships of the media society relationship; media audience relationship and society audience relationship. For the present study the relationship between media and audience is taken as key concept from the theory. It states that this relationship determines how media affects the audience. Though the theory focuses more on the information need of the individuals as a strong determinant for the media to affect the audiences, I propose that trust reposed in the media also has a relationship with how audience is influenced by news contents.

The more salient the trust in the media the likelihood for the media to affect the audiences becomes stronger. In other words the researcher proposes that since the audience relationship to the media plays an important role in opinion making, the audience perceived credibility of news media would also play a considerable role in opinion making. The more audience perceive the news channels as a reliable information sources the more are the chances that audience opinion may be influenced by the information received by the media. This proposition is further integrated with the social constructionist approach which proposes that media though has a significant effect in constructing meanings by offering messages in a systematic way to the audience, meanings are constructed on the basis of some form of personal prior structures of meanings, which is often shaped by the way we collectively identify. Hence, it allows both the power of media and people.

Social constructionist approach proposes that the media tend to offer a 'preferred' view of social reality which appears to be widely accepted and reliable. This includes information, cues of interpreting it, forming value judgments and opinions. Media systematically offers ready-made meanings to the audience. Later, it is up to the audience whether or not to adopt the view offered, despite being the only source of information on distant matters. The alternative sources could include influences from personal experience or from the social or cultural environment that might even be a basis for active resistance to influence. Thus there is no automatic or direct transfer of meaning but negotiation between what is offered and what a receiver is inclined to accept.

All the earlier formulations of effect studies are not replaced by the constructivist approach especially in matters of gaining attention, individual behaviour to direct stimulus or emotional response. However, it does focus its investigation in the societal context and it assumes that eventually constructions made by the audience are the result of number of behaviors and cognitions by numerous participants in highly complex society. This view of the process is a break from 'the all powerful media' paradigm and also

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indicate a shift from quantitative and behaviorist method towards qualitative and ethnographic methods.

This paradigm of effect has two main propositions, first social formations are constructed by media and even history is framed through images of reality in predictable and patterned ways, secondly, social reality is created by people in audiences for themselves and they relate it with the images offered by the media. This approach reflects that though media is powerful in its own way but the power of the people is also reflected in the power of people to choose, and so meanings are created with a continuous negotiation between the two.

This approach that media has a strong influence is questioned when there are issues of public opinion, social attitudes; political choice an ideology (McQuail, 2010). The social constructionist approach though is more to the cultural than to the structural and behavioral traditions and moves towards a qualitative method, it is helpful in the present study to look into the factors that are responsible for creating negotiated meaning of the media text and forming opinion. In the present study the intervening factor of the trust news media is seen as a negotiating factor in the opinion making process. The researcher proposes that while the audience are constructing their own view of social reality in the interaction with the media messages, trust in the media plays a significant role.

The study also develops its research question from the cultivation perspective. The cultivation hypothesis proposes that over time, heavy viewers of television develop views of the world similar to what they see on television. The cultivation or enculturation approach maintains that if one exposes to media portrayals and themes repeatedly and consistently they will influence ones perceptions of these items in the way media portrays them (Baran, 2000). The premise of cultivation analysis is that the more time one spends in world of television , the more likely one is to see the social reality as framed by the television. It proposes, through the 'mainstreaming effect' that heavy viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behaviors which ordinarily stem from other factors and influences. In other words, different groups of viewers , having different cultural, social and political characteristics, fail to have divergent views on issues as they are all heavy viewers of the same television programs.

The present study examines this relationship between heavy viewing and opinion formation. It examines the proposition whether heavy viewing of television makes the opinion of the audience similar to what they see on television and whether heavy viewing of television news has any significant relation with the trust in the media.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

H1: There is a significant relation between the media perceived as a credible source of information and formation of political opinion.

H2. There is no relationship between media usage and political opinion.

RQ1. Is there a relationship between perceived media credibility and media usage?

Methodology

A survey of the Punjab's universities students was conducted . A list of public sector universities of Punjab, recognized by Higher Education of Pakistan, was prepared. Through multi-stage sampling technique sample was drawn . Public universities were randomly selected and a total 650 questionnaires were filled. 470 filled questionnaire was received, which makes a 70.8% response rate. Most of the students had more or less same age and educational level so the demographic composition was more or less homogeneous.

Independent variables

In the study the two main dependent variables were exposure to media television news channels and perception of media as a credible source of information. The statistically controlled variables were demographic details of age and education. The ages of the university students ranged from 18 to 20 years. Their education level was from 14 to 15 years of education. Television exposure was measured with the hours spent in television viewing news channels, and the programs they preferred to watch. High graded of news users were considered those respondents who watched television for news and information more than other reasons.

The other independent variables of the study included media credibility scale. This scale was constructed by the researcher. It included statements whether media portrays events as they are, is a credible source of information for national and international issues, impartiality of media in the coverage of events, and if it can be used as a reliable source to form opinion. Response options were graded on four point scale from 'to great extent' to 'not at all' with higher values representing more credibility. It constituted a summated scale in the sense that a composite measure of Likert scaling was allowed later on.

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The dependent variable, the political opinion variable, was measured with reference to Hilary Clinton's visit to Pakistan and opinion towards US policies for Pakistan. This issue was taken as a criterion variable, as during Hilary Clinton's visit to Pakistan media diplomacy in favour of the US was witnessed. Response options ranged on four point scale from 'to great extent' to 'not at all', higher values represented more un-favourable opinion towards the US (Scale:1-4; M=3.14; SD=.610).

Results

From the 470 respondents 56% were female students and 44% were male students . Out of 470 respondents Television was used most for political information 309 (65.7%) whereas only 1.1% respondents used for political information and 84% students used newspapers as a source of information. The findings only confirmed the general observation that Television news channels are most widely used means of information amongst people.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis between television exposure, television credibility, and political opinion			
	television exposure	media credibility	political opinion
Television exposure		.047	.035
media credibility			.164**
political opinion			

The findings, in Table 1, show that no significant relation exists between exposure to television and political opinion. In the Pearson's correlation test between the television exposure and political opinion the relationship is not significant. Findings show that heavy viewing of audience does not necessarily affect the political opinion of the audience.

Similarly, between perceived media credibility and exposure not significant relation exists. There is no significant relation found between the time spent in front of television news and perception about it as a credible source of information. It means that it is not necessary that if individuals are spending

time in front of television news they are also necessarily perceiving it to be a reliable source of information.

However the relation between media credibility and political opinion was significant, which means that those who had trust in television news were greatly influenced by it in the formation of their political opinion. The findings show that political opinion of audience was greatly affected by the way audiences perceived the credibility of the channels as a reliable source of information.

Table 2: Summary of Regression Analysis for the television credibility and political opinion (N=470).

Variables	B	SE B	t
Television credibility	.193	.054	3.541

Note: $R^2 = .000$, $p < .1$, N= number of students

Results show that there is strong relationship between media credibility and political opinion formation (Table 1). Linear Regression analysis was applied on media credibility as predictor on political opinion. Table 2, results show that trust in television news is a predictor of political opinion. It means that the trust in the media plays a significant role in the opinion making of the audience. The greater the trust in the news channels as a reliable source of information greater is the chances of affecting the political opinion to be moulded in the way in which media is framing the issue. Hence H1 which stated that there is a significant relation between the media perceived as a credible source of information and formation of political opinion is accepted.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis for the television exposure and political opinion (N=470).

Variables	B	SE B	t
Television exposure	.031	.035	.750

Note: $R^2 = .453$, $p < .1$, N= number of students

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Results show that there is a weak relationship between television exposure and political opinion formation (Table 1). Linear Regression analysis was applied on television news exposure as predictor on political opinion. In Table 3, results show that exposure to television news is not a predictor of political opinion. Hence, findings show that the exposure to the television had no relationship with the political opinion. So H2 which stated that there is a relationship between media usage and political opinion is rejected. The findings show that heavy TV viewing does not mean that audiences are influenced by the way media is framing the news.

Table 4: Summary Regression Analysis for television exposure and media credibility (N=470)

Variables	B	SE B	t
Television exposure	.035	.047	1.014

Note: $R^2 = .311$, $p < .1$, N= number of students

Results show that there is no relationship between television exposure and media credibility (Table 1). To answer RQ1, which stated if there is a relationship between media usage and perceived media credibility, the linear regression analysis was applied on television news exposure as predictor on media credibility. Results show that exposure to television is not a predictor of trust in media (Table 4) and the youths' exposure to television does not mean that they also have trust in the media. In other words if audience is viewing TV news channels heavily they are also considering it to be a reliable source of information. So the heavy viewing is not the criterion of trust in the news channels.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study examined political opinion at two key points in the university students of Punjab. Age of the students and their educational level were kept as controlled variables. To examine the two filters which contributed in the political opinion the researcher used linear regression analysis. The two filters examined were television exposure, and trust in media. It proposed to particularly study the role of audience trust in the news media as a reliable source of information in the opinion making process.

Findings rejected the notion that the audience opinion has any significant relation with heavy viewing of television news. The audience heavy viewing did not influence their opinion making and their opinion was not found to be similar to the views projected by the television news channels. Likewise, the extent to which they used the television for information did not have any significant relation with their trust in the medium as a credible source of information. The audience who watched television heavily did not necessarily perceive media as a credible source of information.

Findings also did not support the proposition of the Media Dependency theory which stated that more people depend on the media to meet their needs more important media becomes in their lives and therefore the effect of media also increases. However, the findings support this contention of the theory that the influence of media on the audience should be studied in the context of the audience relationship with the media. In the present study the relationship of the audience media relationship, trust in the media and the dependency on TV news for information was taken as a predictor of influence. The findings showed that the audience were influenced by the television views provided they trusted the media as a credible source of information. Though TV news channels were used most as source of information compare to other media, this did not affect the audience opinion making. Despite the dependency on TV news channels the influence of news on the opinion making was not significant. The perception about the media as a credible source of information seems like a stronger predictor than the usage.

Similarly, from the social constructionist perspective the findings supported the proposition that the trust in the media by the audience play a significant role in constructing their own view of social reality in the interaction with the media messages. It showed that the social reality created by the audience in their interaction with the media is significantly dependent on the extent of trust reposed in the media. If the audience perceives the media as a credible source of information their construction of social reality will be in conformity with the symbolic reality created by the media.

The limitation of the present study is that its findings cannot be generalized for people of all ages and education. As the universe of the present study were students from the age of 18 to 22.

In conclusion the researcher proposes that though there is a large gap between those who claim the media has great power to influence, and those who dismiss these claims, one cannot put aside either of the propositions. The rejection of the claim that media is powerful on the grounds that there is a lack of empirical proof can also lead to one kind of error and only empirical study

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cannot be taken as a strong claim that television does not have an influence in opinion making. The study only tries to show that the potential effects of mass media are too complex, subtle or long-term to be captured by the still rudimentary forms of measurement available. It reminds us to be careful to accept the claims that media is powerful. What is required is to understand that that media has different types of effects in different situations. Most importantly, we should try to understand the effects are determined both by the sender as well as by the receiver.

It seems that what Berelson said in 1948 that, “some kinds of communication on same kinds of issues have brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effects” (P. 172) is still a proposition to be explored, with all its complexities, even today. In the context of the present study the covariate of trust in the media effect studies serves as a significant variable to be studied. One of the key reasons to consider this as an intervening variable in media effect studies is that it has also been found that the confidence of the public in the media has decreased over the last decade (Kioussis, 2001; Meyer, 1988; Gaziano, 1988) . This has caught the attention of the scholars to look into the consequences of this mistrust on the audience as media skepticism plays a vital part in the perception of the climate of opinion(Tasfati , 2003). In the media effect theory building process what is now required is to conduct more researches to study the interaction between news messages and their influence with the covariate of audience trust in the media.

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