The importance of mass media systems for the effective functioning of transparent, responsible, broad-based, and participatory democratic institutions is widely noted. The specific arrangements in each country's systems of governance and media may vary, as may the relationships among media, government, the private sector, and groups that make up the citizenry. Societal narratives developed in prevalent socio-political conditions may also shape the boundaries for media.

The theory of framing helps us understand how journalists, through recurrence and placement, make some aspects of political messages readily noticeable and more prominent. The notion of media frames has helped in understanding how issues are packaged by professional communicators by using key words, images and symbols to emphasize on certain aspects of an issue. In political communication, media frames are used to influence public opinion in a direction deemed desirable by the communicator. The receivers employ their individual frames and process information to make sense of the media messages.
In this article, we will examine and compare media frames in editorials in an important period in Pakistan’s recent history. Newspapers editorials concerning the politico-judicial crisis in Pakistan in 2007 will be content analyzed to explore how themes of institutional legitimacy were framed and articulated. The analysis is conducted by studying the case of the restoration of Supreme Court Judges in Pakistan. The case provides a rich description of how media framing of an issue gathered popular support for an institution (judiciary) whose credentials were seen initially with suspicion by the masses. Ironically, the media framing of judiciary contradicted with the most powerful and trusted institution of the country: military. However, the way media framed the issue by relating it with social issues like justice, equality and prosperity; galvanized support of civil society organizations and masses in general.

The paper concludes by raising questions for professional practice, media ethics, media governance, media relations with narratives popular among audiences, and media’s contribution to the building and maintenance of democratic institutions.

Literature Review: Framing and Institutional Legitimacy
The paper explores the role of media framing in developing institutional legitimacy. The questions orienting the paper are whether media portrayal of an institutional performance played a pivotal role in making the populace believe the legitimacy of different institutions, and in what ways. The role of media presentations of ongoing events and institutions and their reception by the public is central to the claims of links between media construction of news and the role of different institutions. The policies adopted by the institutions considered legitimate meet with acquiescence from the polity. Furthermore, the institutions whose legitimacy is established and whose support is diffused in a society may also be able to influence media portrayal of various issues in a way that safeguard their interests. The
Legitimate institutions work with and through media to frame issues and events in a way that perpetuate their prestige and importance in the society. The frames build by the legitimate institution is accepted by the populace due to their trust in the institution and this is most likely supported in the media framing of institutional roles and actions.

The assumption is that the power and prestige of a particular institution plays a pivotal role in determining the narrative that media will adopt and that the populace will accept. Furthermore, it is also assumed that frames are not solely dependent upon the media and the societal elites but are also contingent upon the prevalent social discourse and context. Thus, it is not always true that media influences the perception of their audience; as in some cases it is the other way around. Media shapes their frames in accordance with what the populace believes.

The paper does not suggest media framing to be the sole determinant of acceptance of a perspective on and issue or developing institutional legitimacy; rather there are various contextual factors such as political, social and economic milieu of the period which also play equally important parts. However, the selection and implementation of a peculiar frame by media is vital to spur the popular support for the institution. Furthermore, a change once brought in people’s perception about the legitimacy of an institution can be perpetuated by the performance of the institution. Hence the legitimacy gained by the institution through media framing may solidify somewhat permanently in the mind of the public if the institution performs according to the people’s expectations.

The analysis builds on the theoretical foundations and conceptual framework of the two key concepts under study: media framing and institutional legitimacy. The next section will explore the literature coming from various research traditions dealing with the two concepts.
Media Framing

The concept of media framing is very well established in the literature of communication studies. Early research on mass media indicates that media has been traditionally considered an important actor in building public opinion and manufacturing consent on certain core values (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Lippmann, 1922; West & Turner, 2005).

It has been argued that frames “provide the interpretive cues used by readers to make sense of neutral facts” (Kuypers, 2002, p. 198). They are also defined as “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just, & Cirgler, 1992, p. 60) (Gorp, 2007, p. 62). Hence, it can be implied that frames are the “contextual cues” provided by the media through which people evaluate “the subject matter” under consideration (Kuypers, 2002, p. 6):

Facts remain neutral until framed; thus, how the press frames an issue or event will issue public understanding of that issue or event............. Framing, then, is the process whereby communicators act to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed (or ignored) in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others (Kuypers, 2002, p. 7).

Thus the influence of frames is not only confined to agenda settings of public issues, but goes beyond that “and involves influencing public opinions” (Kuypers, 2002, p. 8). Hence, the frames provides contexts to various issues (stories) and plays an important role in emphasizing (or de-emphasizing) their importance and the way these issues (stories) got interpreted. Furthermore, the importance given to an issue by the media can also be judged from the time it allocates for its coverage. Hence, “often, the longer the issue remains in news focus, the more the public perceives it as a crisis” (Kuypers, 2002, p. 5). In present
times, media influence citizens in numerous ways and cultivate realities for them through a process of framing which affects their behavior towards external stimuli (Gerbner, 1986; Littlejohn, 2002).

In political communication, media construct social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) for the citizens by framing politics in different ways but, at the same time, readers/audience employ their own frames to understand these mediated realities. “The process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman R., 2007, p. 11). Framing of politics helps in shaping and changing the behavior of the audience in a direction deemed desirable by the producers of the content. The framing process provides space to negotiate meanings and helps the audience understand which part of the discourse is important (Anderson, 1991).

The process of framing influences the audience in many ways. In fact, the media coverage of an issue can have a cognitive influence on how the public thinks about that issue (McQuail, 2005). Thus, there is likelihood that the individual and media frames will be synonymous in the presence of a strong public opinion on an issue. In this way, both individual frames and media frames will be directly proportional to each other and framing of an issue by media will significantly influences citizenry and vice versa. The paper supports this argument where it has been assumed that initially media framed the issue in a pro-judiciary manner and afterwards the individual frames influenced the media portrayal of the issue. Hence, the personal ideologies of the media interacted with external factors to shape the news and entertainment content keeping in view the commercial interests of the media organization (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008). Whether the media choices attempt to lead the public or respond to public and audiences imperatives is a central theoretic question, and a central question in this case as well.
Institutional Legitimacy

The concept of institutional legitimacy has been analyzed by social scientists from varied disciplines. The development of the construct of institutional legitimacy can be traced back to the modern political philosophers including John Locke whose treatise on government and authority explicated the authority of government (or for that matter any of its institutions) to be legitimate if it is, "carried on with the consent of the governed". The concept was further explained by Max Weber, according to whom, the legitimacy of a political regime means that its participants have certain beliefs or faith in regard to it: "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber, 1964, p. 382). Thus, Weber distinguishes among three main sources of legitimacy—understood as both the acceptance of authority and of the need to obey its commands. People may have faith in a particular political or social order because it has been there for a long time (tradition), because they have faith in the rulers (charisma), or because they trust its legality—specifically the rationality of the rule of law (Weber, 1964). He identifies legitimacy as an important explanatory category for social science, because faith in a particular social order produces social regularities that are more stable than those that result from the pursuit of self-interest or from habitual rule-following (Weber, 1964, p. 124). Every 'system of authority,' he argued, 'attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its 'legitimacy' (Weber, 1946, p. 325).

"Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Another aspect of legitimacy is that once it is established, populace ignores the occasional anomalies on part of the institutions (Perrow, 1981). Legitimacy is a perception or assumption of public about the
institutions. An organization may diverge dramatically from societal norms yet retain legitimacy because the divergence goes unnoticed. Furthermore, legitimacy is socially constructed in that it reflects congruence between the behaviors of the legitimated entity and the shared (or assumedly shared) beliefs of some social group; thus, “legitimacy is dependent on a collective audience, yet independent of particular observers” (Ansell). An organization may deviate from individuals’ values yet retain legitimacy because the deviation draws no public disapproval. In short, when one says that a certain pattern of behavior possesses legitimacy, one asserts that some group of observers, as a whole, accepts or supports what those observers perceive to be the behavioral pattern, as a whole—despite reservations that any single observer might have about any single behavior, and despite reservations that any or all observers might have, were they to observe more. (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Thus, belief in the “rightness” of law can generate an obligation to obey law, which in turn influences (even if it does not determine) action (Gibson, Caldeira, & Spence, 2005, p. 190).

The case of the removal (on 9th March 2007) and the subsequent restoration (on 20th July 2007) of the Chief Justice of Pakistan Mr. Iftikhar Ahmed Chaudhry by the Military Government brings to the fore questions about media representation and framing and institutional legitimacy. We endeavor to explore, using the perspective of media framing, what claims were made establishing institutional legitimacy (or otherwise). The three mainstream English language newspapers i.e. The Daily Dawn (20 editorials), The Nation (48 editorials) and The News International (21 editorials), were examined using an interpretive textual analysis. The editorials appeared in the respective newspapers from March 11, 2007 until July 25th 2007, to allow for the estimated response time in editorials following the deposition and reinstatement of the judicial head. During the 143 day long episode of the politico-judicial crisis, the media portrayal of an institutional performance of the judiciary and
military government provides a distinct view of how media shape their frames differently on the same set of events and respond to views of their respective publics.

Editorial Perspectives on the Judicial Crisis: Discussion

Pakistan has a chequered history with regard to role of Judiciary as an institution and also regarding the military’s episodes of overtaking the elected executive and putting the constitution in abeyance time and again. And in an attempt to prolong their rule, military governments have often defanged the courts and have laid claim to and acquired political legitimacy through enforcing the “doctrine of necessity.”

Daily Dawn, in its editorial dated 12th March 2007, and its first response to the deposition of Chief Justice of Pakistan recalled that, “the judiciary more or less acquiesced in its role as a subservient institution whose duty was to legitimize every authoritarian ruler’s assumption of power, even if he acquired it by means of a military coup, and to uphold all his actions which often were in utter violation of the fundamentals of law and constitutional propriety” (Dawn, 2007, p. 12).

As put rightly by Kupyers (2002, p.6), the frames are ‘conceptual tools which media rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information’ and that the “facts remain neutral until framed...” analysis of media over the issue shows that the immediate response of the media on the issue was the narration of the neutral facts. Since military government in Pakistan was not popular among the populace, and since elements of civil society which included lawyers community at large strongly opposed the removal of the Chief Justice from his office and staged protest demonstrations, the media subsequently then framed its contents in accordance with its perception of public opinion and the propriety of actions of different parties. In addition, in this case, as individual and media frames were synonymous in the presence of
strong public opinion on an issue, framing of an issue by media had influenced the citizenry a great deal as well.

It is also important to note that legitimacy is a relative term and it is mainly understood as both the acceptance of authority and of need to obey its command. According to the analysis of media framing in this context, the determination of military government or the judiciary as legitimate by the populace and the media in particular is seen as the result of the arguments based on the rationality of rule of law. The Dawn developed its arguments on the proceedings of the case of removal of the Chief Justice and subsequent events that followed -- including references filed by the military government against the Chief Justice, his house arrest, banning the footage taken by media, stopping media coverage of the protest demonstrations or else -- on the basis of establishing a rule of law. To The Dawn, the only way forward was to decide on the issue on the basis of merit and in accordance with the constitution. This construct of frames, therefore, in terms of institutional legitimacy follows the reasoning that the people have faith in a particular social order, producing social regularities that are more stable than those that result from the pursuit of self-interest (Weber, 1964).

The analysis also shows that The Dawn had been carefully evaluating the role of other institutions such as the Parliament and demonstrated subtle approval of such institutions even working under the military government. In its May 8th Editorial Daily Dawn writes that “the parliament is in place and the system is working normally” while The Nation in its April 17 2007 editorial however calls Parliament as “rubberstamp and PM as state functionary”. A May 29th 2007 editorial that appeared in The News called for an attempt to find what caused the events to take this course that “The problem obviously is that there are no real checks and balances on the dictator’s power -- not from the judiciary or from parliament, or for that matter even the press”. 
Mainstream media in Pakistan framed the issue of politico-judicial crisis in Pakistan mainly by relating it with justice, human rights and rule of law. The analysis of the constructed frames suggested that military government had been de-legitimized through condemning the ‘extra-constitutional steps’ taken by the military government and thus constantly demanding for the ‘announcement of the date for the general elections (Dawn, May 24, 2007) urging opposition to “force the government to hold free and fair elections” (The Nation, 13th March 2007).

The institution of Judiciary had been legitimized in its frames by calling the act of removal of Chief Justice by a military chief from his office as ‘blow to judiciary’ (Dawn, March 13 2007) demanding that “government should allow the Supreme Court to carry on with what it is doing” (The News, June 13, 2007).

As mentioned, since legitimacy ‘is dependent on the collective audience’ (Ansell), when some group of observers as a whole support and approve of legitimacy of any particular institution, legitimacy becomes socially constructed reflecting congruence between the behaviors of the legitimized entity and the shared beliefs of some social group. In the analysis of how media framed the whole series of events suggests the same pattern. A July 21, 2007 editorial appeared in The News as a response to reinstatement of the Chief Justice and the end of current politico-judicial crisis depicts the same position:

It is also a tribute to the steadfastness of the lawyers’ community, political activists and the ordinary people of Pakistan who were inspired by this struggle for an independent judiciary. This show of solidarity from such a broad section of opinion is a positive development because the judiciary is a crucial pillar of any society and helps in furthering the public interest through its potential watchdog function over the executive –
something that Friday's verdict will reinforce (The News, July 21, 2007).

What does this case tell us about professional practice, media ethics, media governance, media relations with narratives popular among audiences, and media's contribution to the building and maintenance of democratic institutions? The role of media framing in making claims about the legitimacy of institutions is pivotal. Media may shape their frames in accordance with what the populace believes.

Notes and References


