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Coverage of Panama Cases Trial in Pakistan by International Media; Disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif

Abstract

Since the start, the media is known to have the power to influence public opinion and encourage social change (Boban and Vrbat 2016) and there are many examples of media misuse and how they can manipulate language of a news item so as to whatever is reported to consumers of news clearly reflect the mindsets and attitudes of the newspapers.

1.0. Introduction

The Merriam-Webster dictionary's explanation of manipulation is "to manage or utilize skillfully" and "to control ... by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage". The same dictionary outlines media as "the system and organizations of communication through which information is spread to a large number of people". Therefore, media manipulation can be defined as "to control the system and organizations of communication to one's own advantage".

Cunning, 2007 said that it is important to note that rhetoric maneuver characterizes all news, hence gave birth to the rhetoric beat. Cunning, 2007 further explained by quoting the case of "the first twenty-four hours after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the choice of words—by the press and government officials—played a crucial role in setting America on a course that led, ultimately, to the military action in Iraq." This, therefore, means that the selection of words of news over another should be done with utmost care.

Throughout the development in political communication research in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars concentrated more on how much coverage issues gather in the news; they less often examined how the issues were portrayed (Twesbury, 2015). The formation of frames for issues in the news and its effects on news consumers grew as a significant issue in communication in the 1990s and the studies on the said issue continues in the early 21st century. The existing literature currently the

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communication scholars are paying more attention to how political issues are presented in news stories and what impact they have on their audiences.

Keeping the above in mind, this research investigated the differences and similarities in the Coverage of Panama Cases Trial in Pakistan by the International Media. The Panama Papers are 11.5 million leaked documents that detail financial and attorney–client information for more than 214,488 offshore entities. These papers include private personal financial communication about wealthy personalities and public representatives/bureaucrats.

The Panama documents also contain information of the money laundering, corruption, which uncovered connections between Nawaz Sharif, the then-incumbent Prime Minister of Pakistan, family and eight offshore companies.

Adopting an objective discourse analysis, this research scrutinized how international media reported Imran Khan versus Mian Mohammed Nawaz Sharif case at the Supreme Court. Although Nawaz Sharif was accused of money laundering, corruption, and contradictory statements among others, the reservation of judgment on 23rd February 2017 by the court defines certain discourse structures of international newspapers.

2.0. Literature Review

Many noted scholars agree that news framing is an important concept that can be applied to news coverage of events at the local, national and international levels (Watson 2007; Chong & Druckman 2007; de Vreese 2005). Chong and Druckman explain framing essentially stands for presenting news in a manner as to influence how people may view an issue. This could reflect the agenda of the dominant elites. For instance, the struggle of the Kashmiris in Indian Held Kashmir for their rights may be portrayed as a genuine struggle for rights or may be portrayed as a movement inspired from abroad, depending on who controls the papers. The struggle of Palestinians may be described as a struggle for freedom or may be portrayed as terrorism. The groups fighting the regime in Syria may be described as freedom fighters or as terrorist depending on the agenda of the various dominant powers operating in the region. Civilians who die unnecessarily in bombing operations may be referred as innocent victims of war or as collateral damage.

As de Vreese (2005) points out: “Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue.” The framing process involves, as a first step, framing in the newsroom, which can be a reflection of internal factors such as editorial policies, news values, and external factors (de Vreese 2005). Once the news has been released it will have an effect on those exposed to it and is likely to determine how they view issues.

Aalai (2017) has stated: “Framing effects have to do with the way that a given story is packaged and presented to consumers of news. It is strongly impacted by the language that is used to describe given events or ascribed to actors who are identified as critical features of a given story. Language is critical in these presentations because it serves as the [cognitive](#) framework in which we understand the world around us and in the case of exposure to news make sense of a given event or story.” She points out that in cases of mass violence referring to the

perpetrators as “terrorists” or “lone wolf” or “hate crime” or “public shooter”, etc. has huge implications for the way the public perceives these acts of violence.

Aalal’s findings have also been pointed out in the Norwegian context by Falkheimer and Olsson (2014) after dealing with the coverage of the two attacks in Oslo and the island of Utoya, in which 77 people were killed on July 22, 2011, the authors conclude: “The coverage of the attacks is found to be very descriptive, focused on the perpetrator as an individual, giving him questionable political exposure and not analyzing reasons and consequences on a political–societal level. The news framing functioned as a way of depoliticizing the terror attacks by portraying the attack as conducted by a lone lunatic in contrast to a politically motivated terrorist linked to right-wing extremism.”

An interesting study on framing news was carried out by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media Staff 1998). This study addressed the questions: “Do some studies contain discernible underlying messages?” Further the do the journalistic convention of narrating a story “represent a set of professional predilections or biases, which contend with ideology and other personal perspectives in determining the nature of news?” The findings of this project are: a) “increasingly news originated from decisions made in the newsroom rather than by events from the outside”; b) local newspapers tend to rely on traditional straight news accounts and try to explain how things work more. National newspapers are more interpretative and try to put news into a larger perspective.”

Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) have carried out an empirical study that shows that “framing is mediated by both belief importance and belief content, with belief content being the more prominent variable.” Keeping the foregoing in mind, the research is focused on the reporting of the Panama leaks case.

The basic aim of the study is to determine the difference of reporting by the international media and if the coverage showed any bias. The research was guided by the objective to investigate the discourse structures of the selected international newspapers on the coverage of the Panama case and secondly to determine the extent to which the differences in reporting affects consumption of news on the Panama case. ^[1]_{SEP}

The rationale for selecting the said topic was to find out the stance of international media regarding the Nawaz Sharif Panama Case and also to explore if the international media has any biases against or for the then incumbent Prime Minister of Pakistan. With this study, the researcher tried to identify if there are any indication of political influence on the coverage by the international media and determined the importance of linguistics maneuver and choice of words used by the reporters to shape the news according to their stance.

3.0. Background of the Issue

3.1. Panama Papers

Commonly recognized as the “Panama Papers,” the world’s foremost snitch case till today consists of 11.5 million documents and includes a one year investigation report carried out by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists in

order to uncover a worldwide arrangement of corruption and wrongdoing where stacks of documents exposing various leaders and politicians of different countries, criminals, and even celebrities using Panama as a secret hideouts in tax havens. The leak consists of the inspection of over 400 journalists worldwide, and these papers also disclose the offshore assets of a minimum of hundreds of politicians and public bureaucrats in over 200 countries.

When these revelations became public, national security consequences erupted and eventually various regimes changed, resulting in political instability.

Approximately 40 years of data leaked in the Panama based Law firm called Mossack Fonseca can be seen in the Exhibit 1, comprising information from 21 offshore jurisdictions about 210,000 companies.

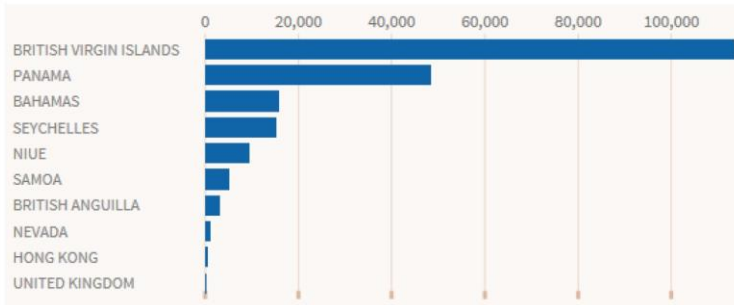
Exhibit 1
Offshore Companies Incorporated Since 1977
The Panama Papers



Source: The Panama Papers
International Consortium of International Journalists

The Panama papers include an extensive array of firms, politicians, and other personalities like celebrities and criminals around the world to have used secret offshore companies. The Investigation report includes the accusations comprising tax avoidance, financial fraud, money laundering, and other such illegal doings. The revealed documents include the top 10 most popular tax havens as displayed in Exhibit 2, exposing that about half (130,000+) of the legal bodies.

Exhibit 2
The 10 Most Popular Tax Havens in the Panama Papers



Source: The Panama Papers
International Consortium of International Journalists

3.2. Elected Members in Panama Leaks

Jamil 2018, explained in his news report that numerous elected members left their offices as an aftermath of Panama Leaks outrage. Iceland's Prime Minister Sigmundur Gunnlaugsson, was one of the firsts to surrendered after his offshore company name Wintris name came on the list of Panama Leaks. Similarly, Panama Leaks enforced Ukrainian Prime Minister, Spanish industrial minister, and various other key names mentioned in Panama documents resigned on ethical grounds include Chile Transparency International President, FIFA Ethics Committee member John and ABN AMRO Bank Member of Supervisory Board Bert Meerstadt. Amongst the exposed list in the Panama papers were also the then Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's family, friends of Russian President Vladimir Putin, relatives of the leaders of China, Britain, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

3.3. Pakistan and Panama Leaks

Nawaz Sharif then prime minister of Pakistan who also has his and his family's names in the Panama Leaks with their offshore companies, unlike most of the other elected leaders, preferred taking the issue to the Supreme Court by writing a letter to form a Judicial Commission instead of resolving it in Parliament (Jamil, 2018). Consequently a Joint Investigation Team was formed and as a result Nawaz Sharif was made ineligible on the basis of non-declaration of iqama (work visa) and salary drawn from the company (Pakistan Observer, 2018).

4.0. Framing theory and Panama Leaks

In the field of communication studies, the concept of framing has been characterized by "identical degrees of conceptual obliqueness and operational inconsistency" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The key principle of framing theory, according to Dennis Chong & James N. Druckman 2007 is that "any news item can be perceived from many different angles and be interpreted as having inferences for numerous deliberations". Framing theory discusses the method by which journalists create a specific conceptualization of a news item or redirect their view about it.

The research literature about the news framing consists of many definitions of what a frame is, however, underlying, most of these definitions suggest one thing in comment that a news frame is the verbal and visual information in an article that directly or implicitly suggests what the problem is about, how it can be addressed, and who is responsible for creating and solving it (Tewksbury 2015)

Gitlin 1980, describes frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse". Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explain frames as 'interpretative packages' that bring meaningful sense to a news item as the editorial board wish it to be like. The fundamental idea of this package is 'a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

The prejudice in the news media is an essential imperfection of the news production procedure (Park 2009). Similarly, this study also pointed out the

difference in the coverage of five different international newspapers regarding the event of the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan. The disparities in the selected newspapers were explored on the bases of the difference in their selection of words, proving that the discrepancies in news framing of this event made the news different in all five newspapers.

5.0. Methodology

In order to investigate the disqualification of Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif in Panama case trial by the international media, the five international newspapers *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Daily Mail*, and *the Guardian*, were selected. All the news on July 28, 2017 particularly regarding disqualification of Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan for Panama case trial were analysed under the thematic analysis.

6.0. Finding and Analysis

By analysing all the news, it was found in all five selected newspapers that each newspaper had a different frame and angle to write the same news. This showed how they framed a news story to look, and what part of the story they wanted to emphasize on. The tone of the paper, different headlines, leads, discourse structures, details, and quotations reflected that the writers used to manipulate the content of the news. The news item studied is the same in all five newspapers but all newspaper chose different ways to write the news which shows how a writer has genre power even if writing tangibly.

To begin with, the *New York Times* captured the news in its topic “How the Panama Papers Changed Pakistani Politics”. In the lead of this article, it is evident that *New York Times*, through their reporter, adopts a declarative tone to indicate how the dismissal of the Prime Minister is based on corruption allegations. The place line indicates that the allegations were a result of leaks. As the byline indicates, Specia (2017) seems to exonerate Sharif as he says “Mr. Sharif’s name never appears in the Panama Papers.” This article further shows how Sharif was noncommittal on the setting up of a company. It is evident that the *New York Times* sympathizes with Sharif since his critics are blamed for his downfall. The article has perhaps deliberately avoided quotations in order to give prominence to the reporter’s message. In what appears to be a considerate approach, Specia (2017) reiterates that Sharif was not directly involved and that the case will not go to Pakistani for investigations. The writer’s choice of language evokes empathy as he reports that it is not the first time Sharif’s image is tainted with corruption.

The *Wall Street Journal* covered the news in a slightly different manner. First, the headline was phrased “Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s Removal Sows New Political Turmoil.” The lead of the article is punctuated with pessimism as the writer chooses to paint a dejected picture of Pakistan. Shah (2017) records that “Pakistan was plunged into a new phase of political turmoil Friday...” The attention of the reader is turned to a compassionate moment which would allow them to consider the fragile state characterized by nuclear and armed stand-offs. Whereas the article labels Sharif as dishonest, it is notable how the reporter weaves his argument to blame the military for cutting short the reign of the Prime Minister. One peculiar feature of this article is the choice of quotations. For

example, capturing the whole event from the dramatic side of judicial activism, which “spurs greater political instability” and stalls “national economy” is a rather combative tone seeking retaliation. The article is however clear on the fact that the estates belonged to Sharif’s children. This makes the newspaper assume a rather celebratory resonance when the reporter says that “great things are beginning”.

The news of Panama Paper case as reported in the *Chicago Tribune* also varies from the two newspapers already discussed. From the headline “Pakistan’s Activist Supreme Court endangers a fragile Democracy”, it is evident that the reporter expresses bitterness from the beginning. The Panama case is handled in fine detail as the reporter chooses to focus on removal of the party chair as an unfair act. The lead of the article captures the reader’s opinion thus painting a picture of political interference. This is a reflection of the Prime Minister’s bitterness. Reporting for *Chicago Tribune*, Rasool (2018) uses the article to express skepticism since the transparency of the court is questioned through quotations of words like “honest”. In what seems to be a premeditated analysis, *Chicago Tribune* attacks the judicial system by labeling the citizens as law-abiding yet they are being betrayed by the Chief Justice in the Sharif case.

Although the newspaper also cites alleged corruption like other previously analyzed newspapers, *Chicago Tribune* lays emphasis on the disregard the judiciary has towards certain people in Pakistan. Addressing the Panama case, Rasool (2018) presents a rather lopsided idea by mentioning that Sharif’s case was characterized by judicial overreach. A significant portion of this article, therefore, lays great emphasis on the judicial interference in democratic matters. Sharif and his children are reported to be involved in a case, which deems them political underdogs who fight, and bounce back to redeem their image. It is further striking to note the kind of language used to depict Sharif. In fact, *Chicago Tribune* draws from a rich comparative data from Bangladesh, USA, and other nations to show how Sharif is the most victimized leader in Pakistan. On a more general scale, Rasool (2018) seems to lean towards the manipulation of democracy by the judicial bosses to create an unhealthy political atmosphere for Sharif.

Another newspaper analysis considered in this research is the *Daily Mail* which is based in the UK. The article by AFP entitled “Pakistan’s top Court to rule in Case that may oust PM” is perchance neutral and only anticipatory. The headline calculatedly uses the modal auxiliary “may” to communicate predictability in a rather non-committal approach. One aspect that seemingly sets *Daily Mail* from other newspapers is the attempt to detail the 11.5 million secret details that were leaked in the Panama case. Further, *Daily Mail* broadens the scope of the case by mentioning the political heir called Maryam. By quoting one of the lawyers who say, “We are hopeful the decision will come according to the law of the country, not on expectations of the opposition”, *Daily Mail* (2017) expresses an anticipatory approach to the entire case. A glimpse of noncombatant tone characterizes the article as options are offered. In fact, *Daily Mail* anticipates either censure or clearance of Sharif thereby making the general outcome difficult to predict. It should, however, be mentioned that one thread that binds these Panama case articles is the enormity of the case and how it leaves a historic impact in Pakistan.

Considering *The Guardian's* coverage of the case, certain linguistic features are evident. This newspaper is also different from the ones previously analyzed. For instance, Rasmussen (2017) chooses to begin the news with ousting of Sharif. In the article entitled “Pakistani Court Removes PM Sharif from office in Panama Case”, the reporter seems to agree with other writers about the impact of the ruling on the economy of Pakistan. Like other newspapers, *The Guardian* presents the case with admiration for the Prime Minister as a leading figure who has taken Pakistan to great administrative heights. The details provided by this article reveal that Sharif's children were minors at the time the offshore companies were purchased in London. As opposed to other articles, *The Guardian* exonerates the children and holds Sharif culpable. The newspaper seems to celebrate the feeling of the opposition leader, Mr. Khan, who mentions that the ruling is an indication of justice for all. One would argue that an air of liberation is implied in the article. However, Rasmussen's (2017) article in *The Guardian* appears to have ambivalent reactions because it concentrates on the guilt of other government officials implicated in the Panama case while at the same time labeling the verdict as sad.

7.0. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research investigated the difference in Panama case reporting among five different international newspapers. The study notes certain observations that all the newspapers that were analyzed uses different headlines, leads, discourse structures, details, and quotations among others to manipulate the message of the article. Although the newspapers reported the same topic, differences arose in the choice of these items which further upholds the widely explored matter in the existing literature that the media diverts the attention of its audience to the issues it chooses people how to think about, by maneuvering the language (Cunning, 2007) and forming different frames to get the desired meaning (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

From the above findings, this study aids in understanding the existence of communication within communication; how news items and media personnel play their parts in framing news stories. It can be inferred that, the way in which any news is fetched, and the frame in which the news is made, as a result, the study discerns different authorial tone and attitude about the subject. The discourse analysis of the five articles showed how writers possess genre power even if reporting objectively. This is evident in the choice of certain lexical items that reflect the inclinations of the reporter. The research, therefore, suggests that where there are many newspapers covering the same topic, a reader should appreciate a number of sources because each is unique in the linguistic maneuver.

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