

Compromised Autonomy: The Impact of Social Pressures on Editorial Decision Making in Top News Channels of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on media sociology and influence of social factors in shaping the content of news channels in Pakistan. Senior Newsroom professionals from top ten news channels of Pakistan were contacted to find out level of social pressures in shaping media contents. A survey of 200 professional journalists, with basic role of gatekeeping and editorial decision making, was held to analyze perception of the broadcast journalists about the social pressures on the way to their independent editorial decision making. It is established that social aspects have a considerable influence on editorial autonomy of the broadcast journalists, but social media is contributing other way round by boosting the independent decision making by the broadcast journalists.

Key Words: *Editorial autonomy, news channels, media professionals, unseen pressures, social influences, TV newsroom, media sociology*

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Introduction

It is established by many scholastic studies that Mass Media influence public perception to shape public opinion. Mass media professionals shape media contents and social factors may shape journalists' way of editorial decision making. Journalists gather information, refine it and then pass it on to the general public. In this process they make editorial decisions based on different internal and external pressures. These pressures limit freedom or editorial autonomy during practice.

How journalists are independent in making editorial decisions? Previous studies point figure to wards advertisers, policy of the media organizations, company's interests, ideology, external pressures, internal pressures and so on. But in this study, the researchers focus is on the social factors that may limit independent editorial decision making of the broadcast journalists. How journalists exercise editorial autonomy in the current social environment, the researchers analyzed the findings-based perception of the working journalists.

Freedom House, a global organization working for human rights and democratic change, reports that over the last decade, Pakistan's media industry reach has stretched to a large audience. "Pakistan has about 90 television channels, 160 radio stations, and 200 daily newspapers" (Pakistan, Freedom in the World 2015, 2015). Freedom House report also says that "Media comes under censorship of both state and non-state actors. As the constitution authorizes "the regime to limit speech on subjects regarding the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion."

Reporters Without Borders' report in context of media freedom, says Pakistan ranks 159th position in the world. Freedom House report (2015) on media freedom in Pakistan also ranks Pakistan in index of countries where media is not free.

The report says that despite Pakistan's diverse media industry, It is one of the world's most unsafe places for media professionals. As per data compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists, 56 Pakistani media workers have been killed from 1992 to August 31, 2015 where three journalists were murdered in 2015 (56 Journalists Killed in Pakistan, 2015).

Considering the situation of the study, the researchers have limited their work related to Pakistan' Media Industry to private news channels only. Based on The Media Logic data, TV rating company in Pakistan, professionals from top ten news channels were approached. (Media Logic, 2015).

Journalists' gatekeeping functions make them socialized to filter news as per the routine practice. How and why media content is filtered, professional working experience with news socialization has developed the journalists' perception about media freedom in Pakistan. To what extent social factors affect editorial autonomy of the professionals, this study intends to go deeper into the perception of the editorial decision makers.

Keeping in view the global situation of Pakistan with respect to Press Freedom, it is assumed that besides other factors, social influences on journalists also bar them to practice freely. A journalist who work for the media outlet and who is supposed to practice press freedom, sometimes surrenders to these pressures. Media are considered forth pillar of society and working journalists can play key role in betterment of society by acting as watchdog and social change agents. But their practice seems chained into fear or favour. Social hurdles on the way to practical press freedom need to be identified.

This study assesses limits of media freedom into minds of journalists in context of the social environment. As journalist broadcast every issue but not their feeling towards working in this environment. This study, after getting point of view of journalist, will be fruitful enough to bring positive changes into journalist community to readjust their journalists' routines if it clashes with social harmony. As the dominant paradigm in development communication also reflects media freedom a vital element for social change (Gunaratne & Burrowes, 2002; 1970).

Literature Review

The Constitution of Pakistan confines censorship in the country with limited restrictions by ensuring sovereignty, public order and morality". There are some limits in exercising media freedom in the country. Official censorship restricts critical reporting.

Before coming to the editorial decision making on private News channels of Pakistan and influence of social factors on the journalistic

autonomy, the basic role of the newsroom should be identified first. If we talk about the Newsroom, the edition decision making section of News Channel, the Rundown desk of Newsroom is a last filter before transmission of produced TV content. Journalists decision to filter news is on the organizational policy and general news socialization. This context of media sociology of broadcast practice can be better understood through the journalists' perception about the state of editorial autonomy in specific and media freedom in general. Because this editorial staff better recognizes the level media freedom they feel after bearing pressure of official policy that is has been formulated in social context.

John C. Merrill (1989, p. 19) says freedom is "the condition of being able to select and to carry out purposes". He explains that there should be no external restrictions on freedom concluding that concludes, freedom should include both the freedoms i.e. negative and the positive freedom.

Paul Ansah (1991) describes further the meaning and the function of press freedom, He sees freedom to broadcast information without any government control.

How to clearly define press freedom? Scholars say the idea is not without controversy because value of freedom varies owing to different social contexts. As Hocking (1947, p. 194) argues that in any discourse of press freedom, two limitations should always be noted.

Picard (1985) discusses the commission report for press freedom saying the media freedom is freedom for and the freedom from. Implying that there should be no external restrains and the media outlets are free to deliver diverse content with socially responsible manner (Picard, 1985).

Some studies suggest that, in spite of the professional ethics, journalists are often obsessed by personality behaviors to reach a decision in situations like ethical dilemmas. For example, Pasti (2005) argues decision making is different in age groups as younger and older journalists differ in decisions in situations of ethical dilemmas.

Some scholars also agree that it is not the only government that influences media, but other potential factors and journalists also curtail press freedom (Stromback and Karlsson (2011, p. 644).

Mano (2005) after analyzing journalists' perception, found that for Zimbabwean journalist the most effective way to avoid internal and external

pressures is to cooperate with those who can exert it; and journalists often cooperate with the powerful. (Mano, 2005).

The concept of autonomy is defined with respect to the individual. In view of Glasser & Gunther (2005), “the individual’s freedom is the freedom from the state, freedom from outside controls and immunity from exercise of authority” (Glasser & Gunther 2005: 385).

As per Ornibring, autonomy also involves independence from political and social institutions (Örnebring 2013: 39).

In his study about social control in newsroom, Warren Breed (1955) views that these are not the journalists only who select the news on journalistic standards, but the agenda is also shaped by social factors like editorial hierarchy, conflict prevention and normative behavior. He also argues that media routines, news making sociology and professionalism collectively contribute to limiting the autonomy of the professionals.

The American Scholar J. Herbert Altschull (1997) gives combination of four situations that defines news content. For him the four factors are structure of news channel, commercial benefits, informal influences; and pressure groups.

Media sociology also affects professionals’ freedom while content production. Stephen D. Reese (2001), views at broad level of the news content formation in a hierarchy of influences that shape journalists, their outlets, routines and ideologies. He classifies influences from macro to micro levels. The factors shaping editorial content have different strengths. The individual level covers professionals’ attitudes. Routines are defined as norms, rules, procedures and technology. The organizational level refers to economy, editorial policy and power relations. For Reese, “extra-media level influences include the government, advertisers, sources, public relations, interest groups and other media. The ideological level encompasses culture, larger social interests and power assumptions” (Reese 2001-179-183).

It is assumed from the available literature on media sociology that news is the product of institutional context and efforts to establish journalistic autonomy are being exercised.

Professionals of which media outlet enjoy more freedom? Studies say that journalists practicing “watchdog journalism” experience a greater degree of autonomy because

journalists belong to these kinds of outlets i.e. public service broadcasting, are mostly free from commercial and corporate pressures (Hanitzsch 2011). On the other hand, Journalists working in full democratic countries in the Western world, observed more autonomy than the counterparts of authoritarian regimes (Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 149). Reich and Hanitzsch also find that, “High professional autonomy among journalists links to higher levels of press freedom and lower levels of state intervention” (2013: 150).

Nygren (2012) argues that the strongest influence over media content is exercised by the top management of media outlets in the form of news policies. Literature sees differences in the perception of the influence of external forces on journalistic freedom. A survey of Swedish journalists showed that advertisers, audiences and politicians influence news content (Nygren 2012) but for Hanitzsch & Mellado political and economic influence is low.

Sjøvaag (2013) termed the level of professional autonomy enjoyed by the media men as a moving concept that is being accustomed as per need of the editorial task. Eun Suk SA (2009) in his study, “*Factors Influencing Freedom of the Press in South Korea: A Survey of Print Journalists’ Opinions*”, argued influence of media freedom is based on three factors, i.e. external, internal and legal.

Previous literature about media freedom indicate that media regulations and external and internal factors of media organizations exert different pressures on working journalists to practice their profession independently as per journalistic norms and standards. Owing to these factors editorial autonomy is compromised.

Pamela Shoemaker (1994) is perhaps the initial researcher to have presented the impression that media not only effects target audiences but it, itself is influenced by a variety of factors. Keeping in view the media sociology, Shoemaker and Reese offered a model of theoretical approaches about the influences on mass media content.

How the news contents are get made? There are major external and internal factors influencing media contents. These factors not only influence news items but also curtail freedom of individual journalist with regard to writing, editing and transmitting news contents. This situation has been

critically examined by Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese in their book *Mediating the Message, Theories of influences on mass media content*, in 1994.

It is argued the media sociology theories that journalists frequently prefer official sources like government officials or police. The reason is they are easily available for an interview as well as journalists think that these sources have important newsworthy things for their news outlet. Hackett also argues that if a journalist interviews an official source, it his or her job proficient by removing the need to double check facts (Hackett, 1985). Reese (1994) says that these levels can affect the media content because this is routine practice of journalists. To what extent these influence media freedom of journalists, perception of journalists analyses the situation. The research study is also relevant to the theories of influences on mass media content shaped by the journalists. Shoemaker and Rees drew different hypotheses based on the internal and external factors influencing media contents. They say, “media organizations making a satisfactory profit are more likely to permit professional influences to win over economic ones. If, however, the organization is economically at risk, the need to make a profit may win out over professional considerations”.

On interest group and self-censorship, Reese says, “the more critical of media coverage an interest group is, the more likely the media are to self-censor.

Interest groups also exert influence on media content by criticizing mass media because interest groups often aim at advertisers for boycott the certain outspoken media company.

Journalists also read each other's stories and watch competitive newscasts. After exploring the literature, the following research questions and hypotheses have been formulated.

Research Questions

RQ. Do the broadcast journalists compromise editorial autonomy in current social environment?

Hypothesis

H.: The Increase in social factors will lead to decrease the editorial autonomy of broadcast journalists

Methodology

Nature of this study is quantitative, and a self-administered questionnaire was designed to conduct a survey from journalists from top ten news channels. To find out editorial autonomy of the professionals a questionnaire was distributed to the senior broadcast journalists working in the newsroom. Keeping in view the nature of the study, Purposive sample of the editorial staff was taken. The top ten news channels, based on rating of Media Logic, were Express News TV, Sama TV, Geo, ARY, Dunya News, AAB TAK News, AAJ, Dawn, News One and 92 News. Geographically these channels' newsroom or head offices are based in Lahore and Karachi. The questionnaire was formulated to assess professionals' perception on editorial autonomy under social environment with a good reliability measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). The questionnaire was designed in Likert scale based on the method to measure media freedom adopted by Global media organization Reporters Without Borders.

A total purposive sample of 200 journalists from ten channels with frequency of 20 journalists from each channel was taken. Closed ended questionnaire on Likert scale was distributed to analyze the results.

Data Analysis

Likert Scale was applied to measure editorial autonomy based on perception of professionals. As there are different social pressures that curtails editorial autonomy of the journalists, as per the reviewed literature, these social pressures are both internal and external. Internal social pressures include, individual attitudes, individual ideology, journalists' work routine, Official policy and Self-censorship. There are two major variables for H 1, 1. Influence of social pressure and 2. Editorial autonomy. As both are continuous variables, so Pearson correlation test was conducted to test the positive relationship between the two variables.

Influence of social factors has been operationalized by the conceptualizing individual attitudes, individual ideology, journalists' work routine, Official policy and Self-censorship pressure groups, social media and audience liking. While the effect of this independent variable, Influence of social pressures, was seen on the dependent variable, editorial autonomy. The editorial autonomy was ceded and analyzed using the five-point Likert scale. If social pressures restrain journalists' editorial autonomy? The scale

will lead us to 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree.

According to Shoemaker and Reese there are different external and internal factors that influence media content. Professionals in Pakistan also see these restrictions in context of practice of media freedom. Balance and objectivity are beauty of the news but do media reflect opinions from all segments of society freely? Data tells that journalists think there are many social pressures that influence media freedom. 51% of the professionals are of the opinion that Pakistani media do not reflect opinions of all segments of the society. Powerful or resourceful social group not only dominate media but also influence the editorial autonomy. This led to more media coverage to pressure groups and sometimes toe media toe line of the groups.

Media sociology affects journalists editorial autonomy with respect to self-censorship too. Sometimes journalists practice self-censorship because of “assumed restrictions” but in reality, these restrictions may not exist at all. Or self-censorship is also practiced because practicing journalists don’t even know the “allowed” or “Not allowed” situations. But this social environment suggests that to what extent journalists feel fear of legal or institutional action. Data picture reflects the same findings. 60% of the respondents practice self-censorship for fear of dire legal or professional consequences depicting the tense environment of limited autonomy.

As journalist is an employee of a probably non-journalist owner, therefore he/she keeps in mind the interest of the owner. Therefore, besides sacrificing editorial judgment or autonomy, he/she prefers to practice self-censorship owing to owner’s conflict of interest as depicted by the 57% of the respondents.

So official policy is also a social pressure on the editorial autonomy. 57% of the journalists think that the official policy of the news channel needs to accept even unwillingly because the working journalists are answerable to the pay master.

There is another interesting finding state that as editorial autonomy is decreases with social pressures but being influenced by the social media trends and audience liking. In the age of social media, where Facebook and Twitter have also become a good source of news gathering, news hunting

and news modification as per demands of the viewers, broadcast journalists also go for self-censorship ceding pressures to the audience opinion. For example, if the audience criticizes a news of a news channel with strong reactionary comments on the channels' social media account, then on building up pressure, professionals have to listen to the audience compromising their editorial autonomy. Findings also support the same as 56% of the respondents agree on it.

As literature suggests, individual ideologies also affect media content, in context of media freedom perception of professionals suggests the same. 51% of the broadcast journalists say that conflicting personal ideologies and attitudes also curtail free practice of media at individual level.

Media freedom is also restricted in the name of official policy or internal interests. As findings show that 74% of the professionals think that these factors bar editorial independence during practice.

Media routines also affect media content. News channels reliance on other media for news, news priority or news treatment is a big hurdle in context of editorial independence. So are the findings as 70% of the practicing professionals agree that news channels usually change their editorial content priorities in following of competitive channels.

Data shows that news and deadline go hand in hand. Sometimes flow of news is so rampant that certain news is deprived of deep consideration, treatment and editorial judgment. This deadline pressure affects editorial judgment at media routine level, as 65% of the respondents agree that deadline pressure usually makes them run traditional content without freely exercising news sense to angle it using editorial independence.

At individual level, 47% of the professionals also think that they feel fear by open criticism without consulting it with seniors. Reason is all newsroom should be on same page and that policy travels from top to bottom and because of lack of coordination, juniors may fall in trouble therefore consultation within newsroom keeps on modifying news contents potentially.

Mainstream media is more careful in transmitting sensitive content but on social media users enjoy more freedom and flexibility. But it is also true that media professionals are being encouraged by the pattern of social

media in context of media freedom. Finding are also the same as 63% of the professionals think that emergence of social media with open discussion on sensitive issues is boosting patterns of exercising more freedom practice.

Finding the audience liking is also a big factor that influence editorial independence. As private media work for ratings and ratings comes from audience liking. Therefore, 63 % of the professionals also agree that news is also being prioritized based on audience liking rather than pure editorial judgments as suggests the data in the following table.

Pressures groups like religious groups, cable operators, political wings, businessmen and traders also influence journalistic autonomy. 68% of the journalists think these pressure groups as speed breakers towards the path of Media freedom.

Based on descriptive statistics, as data shows, Social pressures are also found to be influencing factors that restrict media freedom in perception of professionals. As the table indicates mean value of 3.4 close to the scale “Agree” to the social environment that affect editorial autonomy while processing media contents.

Social Environment of Editorial Autonomy		
N	Valid	200
	Missing	0
Mean		3.4236
Median		3.4545
Std. Deviation		.52247
Pearson Correlations coefficient $r=0.68$		

The value of Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.68 which indicates that there is a positive association between influence of social factors on editorial autonomy of the broadcast journalists in Pakistan so the Hypothesis, “The Increase in social factors will lead to decrease the editorial autonomy of broadcast journalists” is supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of the study also conforms to the theories of influences on mass media content as critically examined by Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese in their book *Mediating the Message, Theories of*

influences on mass media content, in 1994. Both major external and internal influencings are restricting editorial autonomy as perceived by the media professionals.

Previous literature reveals that media sociology of news also affect editorial treatment of mass media content. According to Shoemaker and Reese there are different external and internal factors that influence media content. Professionals in Pakistan also see these restrictions in context of practice of media freedom. There are different conditions in which newsroom staff works and engages with. There are two major conditions i.e. internal pressures and external pressures. Internal pressures include journalistic routine, deadline pressure, policy of news channel, ideology, self-censorship and external pressures include influence of social media, influence of other media channels, government and advertisers influence and potential pressures of religious leaders. Findings show that in the environment of media sociology, journalists' freedom is also being compromised to some extent.

As mainstream media manufacture content for audience, therefore every news channel strives hard to treated content in well presentable format by using Graphics, 3d elements, and animations as well as twisting and angling the news to make it beautifully presentable and beautifully digestible. As audience is targeted for ratings, therefore assumption of audience liking becomes a major external factor that influence editorial freedom. As results of the study depicts the same situation. Audience liking is found to be a big factor that influence editorial independence. 63 % of the professionals agree that news is also being prioritized based on audience liking rather than pure editorial judgments other than journalistic judgment of news contents freely.

Social media has also become a good barometer to measure audience liking. In the age of social media, where Facebook and Twitter have also become a good source of news gathering, news hunting and news modification as per demands of the viewers, broadcast journalists also go for self-censorship ceding pressures to the audience opinion.

Emergence of social media has also found to be another external factor that influences priorities of newsroom staffers. Generally, mainstream

media is more careful in transmitting sensitive content but on social media users enjoy more freedom and flexibility. Therefore, trends of social media on sensitive issues become encouraging for mainstream media to practice freedom. Findings also show that emergence of social media with open discussion on sensitive issues is boosting patterns of exercising more freedom practice

Media freedom is also restricted by different internal factors. Findings show that in the internal interests of news channels bind hands of professionals to process the news content freely. As an internal factor, media routines affect media content to a large extent. Media routines mean Journalists have developed routines from endless pattern of norms in response to common situations. In this situation, journalists' uses gate keeping and sometime a news on merit is filtered by the filtration of the media routines.

Another internal pressure, news channels reliance on other media for news, is also affecting practice of media freedom by professionals of a news channel. Majority of the practicing professionals agree that news channels usually change their editorial content priorities in following of competitive channels.

Similarly, deadline pressure is another internal pressure on media content processing. Sometimes flow of news is so rampant that certain news is deprived of deep consideration, treatment and editorial judgment. This deadline pressure affects editorial judgment at media routine level and majority of the respondents think that deadline pressure usually makes them run traditional content without freely exercising news sense to angle it using editorial independence.

At individual level, sometimes editorial autonomy is also being compromised. Results show that journalists feel fear by open criticism without consulting it with seniors. This organizational pressure affects individuals' will to freely giving treatment to news content to avoid any inquiry. Because sometimes official policy is covert, and communication is not transmitted at gross root level in the newsroom.

Journalists also think there are many social pressures that influence media freedom. Majority of the professionals are of the opinion that

Pakistani media do not reflect opinions of all segments of the society. Sometimes journalists practice self-censorship because of “assumed restrictions” but in reality, these restrictions may not exist at all. Or self-censorship is also practiced because journalists don’t even know the “allowed” or “Not allowed” situations. Findings show that majority of the respondents practice self-censorship for fear of dire legal or professional consequences depicting the tense environment of limited autonomy of media.

As literature suggests, individual ideologies also affect media content at internal level, therefore in context of media freedom perception of professionals suggests the same. Majority of the professionals think that conflicting personal ideologies also curtail free practice of media at individual level.

Summing up all the internal pressures on media content, perception of journalists suggest that these factors are also affecting practice of media freedom in Pakistan.

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