

Religious Madrassas in Pakistan: Analysis of Washington Post since 9/11

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Abstract

The western media has consistently been projecting that there is a link between certain madrassas in Pakistan and jihadi elements which they have declared as terrorists. The American elite press has always been indicting madrassas (religious schools) as the main source of violent Islamic radicalism. This study analyses the opinion page (editorials, op-eds and columns) of the Washington Post published between Sept. 11, 1999 to 30 th April 2009 on the issue of madrassas and Pakistani society. It has analyzed the discourse of the Washington Post leading to certain findings.. The inquiry found that I these writings have used the term madrassa(s) for 278 times. The study has also revealed that the term 'madrassa' or 'religious school,' have been associated with the 'violence' and/or 'extremism/fundamentalism' verifying the hypotheses that the Washington Post articles expose the madrassas as the genesis of violence and hatred towards the West. The research also found that number of sentences communicating negative connotations about madrassas is greater than the number of positive sentences. These findings correlate hypotheses of the study that the Washington Post articles since 9/11 have portrayed the Pakistani madrassas in derogatory manner and addressed them with severe criticism.

Keywords: Terrorism, Madrassas, Religious Schools, Extremism, Fundamentalism

Introduction

The Pakistani madrassas have been a source of making headlines since 9/11 when the twin towers of the World Trade Center were attacked by terrorists in the United States. The investigations so far proved that none of the 9/11 attackers were Pakistani madrassas students; however, the Western press has been citing these madrassas a source of intolerance, extremism and terrorism in the world.

Statement of problem

Evidences suggest that the Western press has taken a very negative stance against the religious schools commonly found in the Pakistani culture where hundreds and thousands students are registered. This study has made an attempt to address the question that how the Washington Post has portrayed the image of the Pakistani madrassas in its opinion page after the 9/11 event.

Madressa: A definition

The term "Madrassa" has been derived from Arabic language which means a "school." However, review of the prevailing literature concludes that madrassas are those institutions which impart religious education through their own curriculum instead of one prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan" (Andrabi et al., 2006).

American Heritage Dictionary of English language (2005) defines the term madrassa as "A building or group of buildings used for teaching Islamic theology and religious law, typically including a mosque."

Review Of Literature

Despite the abundance of literature available on the positive and negative roles performed by madrassas in the Pakistani society, not a single study has been conducted to investigate the agenda setting role of western media. A large number of opinion and editorial writings appeared in the western media since 9/11 has framed madrassas as the institutions propagating extremism and intolerance in the Pakistani society. The growth of intolerance and violence in Pakistani society has been linked to the growth of madrassa enrolment. (Riaz, 2005).

A number of authors in the west have associated the Pakistani madrassa with conservatism, extremism and have held them responsible for the militancy in the name of Islam (Haqqani, 2002; Singer, 2001). (.). Bluestein (2002) citing Washington Post that the the number of madrassas in Pakistan is increasing day by day and their students enrolment between March 2002 and July 2002 has been boosted from 500000 to 1.5 million.

Keeping in view the influence of madrassas in Pakistani society, the United Nations, Western governments and the United States of America also provided texts books to madrassas to limit their influence and introduce their students with the formal education e.g. Mathematics, English and other modern disciplines in education. (Stephens & Ottaway 2002, cited in ICG 2002: 13).

The ICG (International Crisis Group, 2002) surveyed the Madrassa system in Pakistan and its roots within the Pakistani society. The report cited evidences from the existing literature and the news media, probing the madrassa links with the violence and extremism in Pakistan and relates these connections to Taliban and the Al-Qaeda.

McClure's (2009) study suggests that there is a link between certain madrasas in Pakistan and Islamic extremism. However, this link has been exaggerated in the Western media in an effort to charge the madrassas as the origin of Islamic fundamentalism. Report of the International Crisis Group (2004) asserts that the state education system in Pakistan has failed and religious madrassas are very instrumental in spreading hate against the West. The report recommends the actions to curb the extremism in the Pakistani society. But the report is based on the information given by the Pakistani and the Western media. Mughees (1996) believes that the treatment of the U.S. elite press is biased relating Hamas to the Islamic extremism.

Ali and Khalid (2008) investigated the portrayal of 12 Muslim countries by the U.S. magazines during 1991-2001 and found that both the magazines have negatively portrayed these Muslim countries. The research categorizes their articles as negative, positive and neutral for these countries.

Theoretical Framework

According to Fairhurst & Sarr (1996) framing consists of three elements: language, thought and forethought to talk about a concept so as to give it a positive or negative connotation. (Deetz, Tracy & Simpson, 2000). Framing is a term used in [media studies](#), and refers to the [social construction](#) of a social phenomenon by news media. It influences the individual's perception of the meanings attributed to words or phrases. The frame through the elements, encourage certain interpretations and discourage others. According to Fiske and Taylor, human beings are by nature "cognitive misers" and think very little. Frames provide people a quick and easy way to process information.

The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Framing is an important topic since it can have a big influence and therefore the concept of framing expanded to organizations as well

The media draws the public attention to certain topics. This is the original agenda setting 'thought'. In news items it occurs more than only bringing up certain topics. The way in which the news is brought, the

frame in which the news is presented, is also a choice made by journalists. Thus, a frame refers to the way media and media gatekeepers organize and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audiences interpret what they are provided. Frames are abstract notions that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence the perception of the audience, this form of agenda-setting not only tells what to think about, but also how to think about it. (net, 2011).

Framing is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another.. According to Fairhurst & Sarr (1996) framing consists of three elements: language, thought and forethought. *Language* helps us to remember information and acts to transform the way in which we view situations. To use language, people must have *thought* and reflected on their own interpretive frameworks and those of others. Leaders must learn to frame spontaneously in certain circumstances. Being able to do so had to do with having the *forethought* to predict framing opportunities. In other words, one must plan in order to be spontaneous.

So, the present study investigates the opinion page writings appeared in the Washington Post through framing approach. The existing literature indicates that these Islamic-related terms like madrassas, religious schools were associated with extremism, violence, intolerance, terrorist attacks, suicide bombing and bomb blasting.

Methods

To test the hypotheses developed for this study, the Washington Post articles published during the last 9 years and 7 months since September 1999 until April 2009 have been selected.. Although none of the 9/11 hijackers was from Pakistan, , the U.S. media frequently blamed that they were all trained in Pakistan or Afghanistan and were cultivated by religious madrassas. Since then, the U.S. media have on and off held Pakistani religious madrassas responsible for the prevailing state of violence and extremism in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, for this reason, this specific period has been selected for investigation of the hypotheses.

Keeping in mind the nature of the topic, the content analysis research method has been employed in order to examine the coverage given to the Pakistani religious madrassas by the Washington Post. Using the Nexis.com database and the online edition of the Washington Post, all the stories that contain the words, "madrassa(s), or "religious school(s), terrorism and/or extremism, in one story, have been drawn out for analysis. Multiple searches were used to define the keywords in the headline, leading paragraph and body of the story separately limiting the search within the specified time frame. A contextual analysis of the sentences was performed to investigate the positive, negative and neutral meanings of the words and phrases within the articles of the Washington Post.

The Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in the study is each single sentence of the articles appeared in the Washington Post. The articles of the Washington Post as a whole serve as contextual unit.

Category Construction

Each sentence of a news article was coded as one of three main categories-positive, negative and neutral, keeping in view the likelihood of its cultivation of positive, negative or neutral coverage and/or portrayal of religious madrassas in the Washington Post.

Positive Sentences (Code 1)

Sentences which depict the constructive role of madrassas either by adopting the formal educational curriculum or their liberal behavior were coded as positive, e.g. *Pakistan Walks Fine Line In Cooperation With U.S.* (Washington Post, September 15, 2001).

Negative sentences (Code 2)

Sentences which portray the madrassas as source of violence, extremism and terrorism were coded as negative sentences, e.g. *Pakistan: Still Schooling Extremists* (Washington Post, July 17, 2005)

Neutral Sentences (Code 3)

The sentences which don't clearly mention emphasis on either positive or negative aspects of the madrassas were coded as neutral sentence.

Hypotheses

After reviewing relevant literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- Negative coverage of the Pakistani madrassas is more than the positive coverage.
- Majority of the opinion writings hold Islam and the madrassas responsible for promoting violence and extremism in the Pakistani society.
- The Washington Post has been used as propaganda tool against Islam, Pakistan and Madrassas and seems supporting the U.S. foreign policy towards war on terror.
- The Washington Post gives only one side view of the Madrassa system in Pakistan and in most of its articles has related it to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. .

Finding-1. A total of 231 relevant articles were published in the Washington Post. These articles contained the words “madrassa(s), religious school(s), extremism, and violence” excessively highlighting the madrassas as the genesis of hatred, violence and extremism. The number of relevant material appeared in the Washington Post opinion page is very high in the years of 2001, 2002 that is 22 and 26 percent respectively. It sharply went down in 2009.

Table 1 : Total number of relevant articles published in the Washington Post year-wise.

Year	Number of Articles (n=231)	Percentage
1999	01	0.63291
2000	05	3.16455
2001	36	22.78481

2002	42	26.58228
2003	24	15.18987
2004	16	10.12658
2005	27	17.08861
2006	23	14.55696
2007	31	19.62025
2008	20	12.65823
2009	06	3.79746

Finding-2. The word 'madrassa' has been mentioned 278 times in these 231 articles appeared in the Washington Post. The use of the word madrassa keeps very high frequency in the years of 2001 and 2002 and very low frequency is observed in 2009.

Table 2 : Number of word "Madrassa(s)" mentioned in the Washington Post articles.

Year	Number of Word "Madrassa(s)"	Percentage
1999	00	0
2000	06	3.797468
2001	21	13.29114
2002	73	46.20253

2003	27	17.08861
2004	36	22.78481
2005	28	17.72152
2006	17	10.75949
2007	48	30.37975
2008	19	12.02532
2009	03	1.898734
TOTAL	278	

Analytically, after the 9/11 terrorist incidents the Washington Post articles started discussing the 'madrassas' more vigorously and the use of word 'madrassa(s)' varies between 0 to 73 times. The years 2002, 2004 and 2007 have been ranked highest in which the use of term 'madrassa(s)' has been highest. These findings support our hypotheses no. 3 that The Washington Post has been used as a propaganda tool to shore up U.S. foreign policy and to put Pakistani Government under pressure to do more to reform madrassas education system. The content analysis finds that the articles focus and emphasize on the induction of mathematics, English and other modern times subjects and stresses to remove certain objectionable (in their opinion) contents from the madrassa curriculum.

Finding-3. The phrase religious school has been used for 198 times and its association was showed with terrorism, intolerance and violence happening across the world.

Table 3 : Number of phrase "Religious School(s)" mentioned in the Washington Post articles.

Year	Number of Phrase "Religious School(s)"	Percentage
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1999	2	1.265823
2000	5	3.164557
2001	41	25.94937
2002	45	28.48101
2003	15	9.493671
2004	11	6.962025
2005	23	14.55696
2006	15	9.493671
2007	26	16.4557
2008	13	8.227848
2009	2	1.265823
TOTAL	198	

The findings in the Table 3 above show that the phrase “religious school(s)” has been used in parallel with the term “madrassa” to explain what does it mean in English language so that the readers of other languages can also understand what is meant by “madrassa.” The analyses of these Washington Post articles depicts that where there is the word “madrassa,” it has often been alternatively explained in English language. It would be appropriate to mention this phrase was frequently appeared with term madrassa to make it understand for the non Muslim readers.. The content analysis of these 231 articles maps that these both terms have been mentioned in plural form 10 times and each time in conjunction with each other just for the purpose to explain the term. Finding-4. In 231 articles, the word ‘extremism’ has been mentioned for 80 times. It was related to the madrassas and Islamic literature thought in these madrassas.

Table 4 : The use of word “extremism” mentioned in The Washington Post articles.

Year	Number of word “extremism”	Percentage %
1999	0	0
2000	2	1.73913
2001	0	0
2002	22	19.13043
2003	5	4.347826
2004	6	5.217391
2005	11	9.565217
2006	12	10.43478
2007	19	16.52174
2008	3	2.608696
2009	0	0
TOTAL	80	

Finding-5. The word 'violence' has been used for 15 times associated it with madras (s) blaming them as the source of violence, extremism and terrorism.

Table 5 : The use of word “violence” mentioned in The Washington Post articles.

Year	Number of word “violence”	Percentage
1999	0	0
2000	1	0.869565
2001	11	9.565217
2002	7	6.086957
2003	8	6.956522
2004	23	20.00000
2005	14	12.17391
2006	16	13.91304
2007	21	18.26087
2008	8	6.956522
2009	6	5.217391
TOTAL	115	

Shift it to the conclusion. These findings again support the hypotheses no. 2 of this study.

Finding-6. A total of 148 sentences appeared in the 231 articles that framed the term madrasas as negative and associated it with extremism and violence. On the hand only 34 sentences were appeared in these articles that framed this as positive and framed these madrasas as welfare institutions that educate and feed the poor.

Table 6 : Overall coverage of madrassa issue in The Washington Post articles.

Year	Number of Negative Sentences	Number of Positive Sentences	Number of Neutral Sentences
1999	1	0	0
2000	2	0	0
2001	15	1	0
2002	34	12	0
2003	20	2	0
2004	13	4	0
2005	14	7	0
2006	7	2	0
2007	23	3	1
2008	14	2	1
2009	5	1	1
TOTAL	148	34	3

In these Washington Post articles the madrassas have been declared genesis of 'violence or extremism' in Pakistan and have been projected in derogatory manner. These 231 articles have labeled madrassas with unbalanced criticism with blend of biasness and prejudice with madrassas and have been declared the jihadi training camps, source of hatred against the west, violence and extremism in Pakistani society.

The study finds 148 negative sentences against madrassas, Muslims and the Islam. While there have been 34 sentences with quoted remarks from different sources that cite these madrassas and their educational system as the welfare institutions for the poor who cannot teach and feed their children due to bad economy and the prevailing state of unemployment. For the reason those poor send their children to these Islamic madrassas. The findings prove the hypotheses no. 1 that the Washington Post articles since 9/11 have portrayed the Pakistani madrassas in derogatory manner and have exposed them with harsh criticism. The ratio of criticism is much higher as compared to their positive image.

Conclusion

The study probed portrayal of Pakistani religious madrassas projected in the 231 articles published in the Washington Post since September 1999. The study provides both the quantitative and the quantitative research analysis of the Washington Post articles leading to certain findings supporting the hypotheses constructed. The content analysis and the findings support all the three hypotheses of this research. The research finds that in all these articles the term madrassa(s) has been used in 278 times. The study also reveals that where there is the term 'madrassa' or 'religious school,' these have been associated with the terms 'violence' and/or 'extremism/fundamentalism' verifying the hypotheses that the Washington Post articles expose the madrassas as the genesis of violence and hatred towards the west. The research also finds that number of negative sentences on or about madrassas is greater than the number of positive sentences while there are only three neutral sentences. These findings maintain the hypotheses of the study that the Washington Post articles since 9/11 have portrayed the Pakistani madrassas in derogatory manner and have exposed them with harsh criticism. The ratio of criticism is much higher as compared to their positive image.

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