

## SENSATIONALISM IN PAKISTANI PRIVATE URDU NEWS CHANNELS: AUDIENCE PERCEPTION

M. Riaz Raza\*

Dr. Khalid Sultan\*\*

Dr. Mirza Jan\*\*\*

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to document sensationalism in news and current affair programs in Pakistani private Urdu news channels. For the purpose, three independent variables-dramatic subject, breaking news and soft news were examined to measure frequency of sensationalism on these channels. Six leading news channels Geo, Dunyya, Express, Aaj, Ary and Sama news were selected. The respondents believe that the channels are sensitizing the issues frequently regarding politics, crime, terrorism, and celebrity etc. The study also reveals that Geo has a greater viewership and has considered being the most sensational channel at the same time. Results show that these channels are manipulating 'breaking news' and present routine news events as breaking news to create hype. Results indicate that a reasonable portion of news bulletins is consisted of soft news. The variable 'dramatic subject' is denotes to the presence of the category in news items like celebrity, sports, violence, disasters, riots, floods, bomb blasts, drone attacks, crime, drugs, calamity etc. The population for the study was the audiences from urban and rural areas of

\* PhD Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Gomal University D.I.Khan, Pakidtan.

\*\* Assistant professor, Department of Communication Studies, College of Applied Sciences, Nizwa, Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman.

\*\*\* Assistant professor, Department of Mass Communication, Gomal University, D. I. Khan, KPK (Pakistan).

Islamabad who have access to cable TV. The data was collected through questionnaire from 350 respondents by using systematic random sampling technique.

**Key words:** Sensationalism, Cable news channels, breaking news, soft news, dramatic subject

## INTRODUCTION

According to Vettehen et al. (2006) that “Over the past some decades, news critics as well as scholars have argued that market-driven journalism progressively urges news producers and owners to capture the attention of the audience.” The selection of news stories is also crucial when a news team gives priority to soft news on hard news by sidelining straight news to attend the advertisers. McQuail (2000) of the view that, “sensationalism is the use of exciting and even shocking stories, graphics or language at the expense of accuracy to generate heightened interest and excitement. Patterson (2000) characterizes that “soft news as having sensationalist elements regarding famous personalities, being of a utilitarian nature.” We also discuss more recent phenomena in TV news, ‘the breaking news’, news alert, and some call it exclusive etc. According to Miller and Andrea (2004) that “breaking news is a story that is an unexpected event important labeled breaking and unscheduled.” In this study we have analyzed some variables of sensationalism in news stories like: 1) dramatic subject, 2) breaking news and, 3) soft news. The study examined that how frequently these channels sensationalize the issues about politics, terrorism, entertainment, crime, celebrities, sports, etc.

## THE STUDY

The study was designed to analyze document sensationalism in news and current affair programs on private Urdu news channels. And the research questions were: 1) how does audience perceive sensationalism in news and current affair programs in private Urdu news channels? 2) Whether or not the credibility bears an association with sensationalism? And 3) which one of these news channels is the most credible for the audience?

The study has vital importance for Pakistani private Urdu (National Language of Pakistan) news channels, especially in the present scenario when these channels are enjoying a unprecedented and desirable freedom. The study will also provide information about the preferences and priorities of the channels while covering, selecting and presenting of the news items. It will

develop a paradigm for presenting effective and useful news and current affair programs according to the informational needs of the audiences. The results of the study cannot be generalized on whole population due to limitations of the sample of Islamabad city.

The data was collected through a questionnaire (Annexure-I) from the population living in urban and rural areas of Islamabad. The sample was collected from 350 audiences above the age of 25 years (keeping in view the age of the private news channels in Pakistan) coming from various strata of the society. Those audiences were interviewed who followed news and current affair programs regularly on these private Urdu news channels. So, a method of systematic random sampling was used. This study investigated the relationship among three independent variables with dependent variable - sensationalism. The data was analysed and interpreted by using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to get meaning of the phenomenon.

## SENSATIONALISM

Some critics describe their own news watching experience as "detached," as they witness the "bizarre sensationalism" of news programs and wonder about the relevance of entertainers' private lives (Chang, 2005). A tendency toward sensationalism has emerged in several other countries as well. In the United States, journalistic sensationalism has provoked vehement debates ever since Carl Bernstein coined the term "idiot culture" (Carl, 1992).

Although sensationalism in the news media has been a topic of wide concern, the related academic research tends to focus on its manifest content. Little research has been done into viewers' own judgments or perceptions of sensationalism in news reporting. From the viewers' perspective, what does "sensationalism" mean? What are the factors affecting their perception of sensationalism in TV news? This study examines viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in television news. Specifically, we applied a modified measurement procedure developed in the earlier literature on a current national sample in Taiwan, which explores the factors affecting television viewers' perceptions of this phenomenon. By providing a more thorough understanding of the factors affecting public perceptions concerning sensationalism, this study will attempt to provide an insight into the issue of sensationalism from the audience's own perspective.

**PERCEPTIONS, MEASUREMENT, AND FACTORS INFLUENCING SENSATIONALISM**

Postman has claimed that one of the primary factors in the development of sensational news is the increased competition for ratings between news organizations (Neil, 1985). According to Esposito, this may result in news being increasingly structured along themes and in formats originally found in entertainment programs, thus leading to dramatic, fast-paced, and superficial presentations and simplistic explanations that focus on personalities, personal relationships, physical appearances, and idiosyncrasies, all aimed at attracting the largest possible audience (Steven, 1996).

Knight defined sensationalism both in terms of story content and formal features. Accordingly, sensational story content consists of sex, scandal, crime, or corruption, while sensational story formal features include fast editing pace, eyewitness camera perspective, zoom-in camera lens movements, re-enactment of news events, the use of music, and the tone of the reporter voice-over narration. In sum, sensationalism refers to the presentation of news as "a deluge of images and words (Graham, 1989).

**Background**

Pervez Musharraf's rule ushered in increased freedom for the print media and a liberalisation of broadcasting policies. Towards the end of his time in office, however, media rules were tightened under emergency rule. A coalition government, formed in early 2008, pledged to undo measures introduced by the former president. Television is the dominant medium, and there are around 50 private channels. The overwhelming majority of viewers receive them via cable. There are no private, terrestrial stations. More than 100 private FM radio stations have been licensed. They are not allowed to broadcast their own news programmes.

Scores of unlicensed FM stations are said to operate in the tribal areas of North-West Frontier Province. They are usually operated by clerics. Some of them are accused of fanning sectarian tension. The government uses legal and constitutional powers to curb press freedom. Private TV news channels were closed under a state of emergency in late 2007, and the law on blasphemy has been used against journalists. The broadcasting regulator can order a halt to the carriage of foreign TV channels via cable, particularly Indian or Afghan ones. This usually coincides with periods of tension between Pakistan and one or other of its neighbours. Pakistan's press is among the

most outspoken in South Asia, although its influence is limited by a literacy level of around 50%. World telecoms body the ITU estimated in March 2008 that there were 17.5 million internet users. The authorities filter some websites. A growing number of bloggers write about politics.

### Objectives of the study

1. To explore the familiarity of Urdu TV channels among the audience
2. To see the sensational aspect of the Urdu channels
3. To document the most favorable Urdu channels

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The concept of Social Responsibility theory discussed in this research the one created by the Hutchins Commission, formally known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947), Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956) and discussed by other scholars” (Seijiro, 2006). According to Free and Responsible Press (Commission, 1947); “The press should provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning. The press should help in the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society. The press should provide full access to the day’s intelligence.” (pp. 20–29). In fact Self-regulation is an in-house arrangement among media organizations to foster the journalistic rules and principles during their entire business. However, media owners and media teams can maintain some level in their journalistic activities. As stated in this theory, the media should be totally free and independent in its entire business. Although this theory remained under criticism since its inception but it has won a lot of support as well. The Social Responsibility theory is taking root at low pace in the country but with the passage of time the magic bullet theory’ will disappear.

### LIST OF SATELLITE TV LICENCE ISSUED BY PEMRA

Name of the Channel	Name of the Company / Address	Status
VTV-1	Virtual University	Operational

VTV-2		Operational
VTV-3		Operational
VTV-4		Operational
Mashriq TV	Ms. Zaitoon Ahmed (Chief Executive Officer)	Cancelled
Hope	M/s International Marketing & Trading Company (Pvt.) Ltd.	Operational
Indus Vision	M/s Indus TV Network (Pvt.) Ltd.	Operational
Indus Music		Operational
AVT Khyber	M/s AVT Channels (Pvt.) Ltd.	Operational
Khyber News		Operational
K-2		Operational
ARY News	M/s ARY Communications (Pvt.) Ltd.	Operational
ARY Digital		Operational
ARY Zouq		Operational
CNBC Pakistan	M/s Vision Networks TV Limited	Operational
Play TV	M/s 24-Seven Media Network (Pvt.) Ltd.	Operational
Sun Biz	M/s SunBiz (Pvt.) Ltd,	Operational
Haq TV	M/s Galaxy Broadcast Network (Pvt.) Ltd	Operational



## Hypotheses

1. Geo channel is likely more sensational as compared to other Urdu channels
2. Urdu TV channels provoking always the audience sentiments
3. Urdu language is more understandable than the English

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In various countries, market-driven journalism has been identified as the cause of sensationalized news (Stuart, 1999). David (2005) describes the concept that “the term sensationalism is commonly used in reference to the mass media, critics of media bias all political strips often charge the media engaging in sensationalism in their reporting and conduct.” The media outlets focus on attention grabbing or hyped topics regardless of their importance to the general public. They prefer to select such stories which have sensational elements with more dramatizations. Krishnan (2008) cited Amir 2005, that “stories are glorified so frequently on the news that it becomes difficult to differentiate between reality and entertainment. Most often the entertainment quotient is higher than the information value.”

It is observed that the private news channels cover family conflicts, domestic violence, riots, and unrest by sidelining some important issues of the audience’s interest. Recently media, especially TV media covered bluntly and out of proportion the issue of Pakistani Cricketer Shoaib Malik and Indian Tennis Star Sania Mirza. The role of private TV media since its inception has not much appreciable and many a times media created fake controversies. If we analyze the ground reality, the business cum media people hijacked the media systems and they use it how they want. More or less media has been involved in its financial gains and its vested interests. These channels focus on excitement and drama in news programs and they do not give much importance to the core function of journalism ‘investigative and informative aspect’ that is required to build their opinion on the issue. McManus market theory of news production (1994) provides insight into some of these causes. According to him “News makers are confronted with conflicting norms in their daily work. On the one hand, their task is to serve the public by informing them about significant events in accordance with traditional norms of proper

journalism. However, on “the other hand, newsmakers only maintain their advertising revenues in case their newscasts are watched by a considerable proportion of the population.”

The channels prefer to download stories from internet to fill the slot and to keep the audiences busy regardless the importance and utility of the information. The presentation of soft news in a huge quantum is a common practice on private news channels. A huge amount of soft news consisting celebrities, social conflicts, crime, unrest, scandals etc are telecasted very frequently. “In unstructured societies like Pakistan, where fixing responsibility and holding accountability is not part of media routines, there is considerable damage. Lack of organizational checks, not to mention encouragement, has seen news not only being dramatized but also created with ingredients being added to stimulate public interest.” (Ashraf, 2008)

Kristi (2010) says that “with every type of news, the actual ethical practices come down to the person in charge.” Scandalous photos and other evidences are presented which create double shock to the victims. The ethics demands some kind of responsible attitude while giving information to the viewers as viewers ‘believe and trust’ the news blindly. “One of the most controversial issues in modern reporting is media bias, especially on political issues, but also with regard to cultural and other issues. Sensationalism is also a common complaint” (Ethical Codes, 2010). “News organizations maintain an in-house Ombudsman whose role is in part, to keep news organizations honest and accountable to the public” (Journalism ethics and standards, 2010).

The responsibility is an integral part of that freedom and to sustain and secure the freedom there is a need to be more careful for others. Usually, the channels give hype to the less important issues through ‘breaking news’. For example, one prominent channel gives breaking news that Mr. Nawaz Sharif gets his boarding pass and he is going towards plane. Live coverage given to Mr. Chief Justice of Pakistan while he was attending a marriage ceremony. The private news channels are eager to highlight conflicts rather going for their solutions. Patterson (2000) notes that “consumers have more choices over whether they get a highly customized presentation that contains only one type of content, which need not be newsworthy, and which need not come from a neutral point of view.” Burgoon (1978) believes that “credibility of news reporting is another important dimension of the journalistic goal to inform the citizens of a democratic society.” Whereas “Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity. Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes” (Ethical Codes, 2010). Majority of the journalists are



eager to give their point of view in commentary on the news events regardless of the requirement. During reporting they often undermine facts through opinionated news reporting.

## METHODS

### Sample

The employed methodology is a cross-sectional one. In this study quantitative method of survey research have been relied upon. Audience was 310 students enrolled in Master classes of the Gomal University, D.I.Khan (KPK) Pakistan. Therefore, the students of Gomal University (Pakistan) form the population or universe of this study. It was a higher seat of learning on convenient basis of non-probability. Male and female was the unit of analysis. This study aim at surveying the viewers of Urdu news channels in Pakistan in order to record their perception and attitude about the sensational approach of these channels in Pakistan.

## FINDINGS

For easy understanding I have categorized the numerical information according to the nature of the question asked from the audience.

### Level of sensational News

Thirty six percent of the respondents watch Geo News while it is followed by Dunya News with a high difference of (21%). The findings reveal that 51% of the respondents perceive Geo News is the most sensational channel. Positive relationship is existed between frequency of watching the channel and perception of sensationalism.

**Table 1**

Most Watched News Channels			Most Sensational News Channel		
Channel	Frequency	Percent	Channel	Frequency	Percent
Geo News	111	35.8%	Geo News	160	51.6%
Dunya News	65	21.0%	Dunya News	28	9.0%

Aaj News	40	12.9%	Aaj News	20	6.5%
Ary News	12	3.9%	Ary News	00	00%
Express News	62	20.0%	Express News	84	27.1%
Sama News	20	6.5%	Sama News	18	5.8%

Majority (75%) of the respondents observe sensationalism. 46% audiences strongly agree that these channels present news and current affair programs in a shocking way. Positive relationship is observed between existence of sensationalism and presentation of news in a shocking way.

#### **Existence of sensationalism**

Fifty eight percent viewers considered Geo news as a news breaking channel. Majority (57%) of the audiences agreed that the channels are using 'breaking news' to create hype and excitement among viewers. Positive relationship has been observed between frequency of breaking news and existence of sensationalism.

Forty three percent of the viewers watch political news. It is noted that those viewers who watch political news observe more sensationalism. Positive relationship has been observed between frequency of political news and sensationalism.

Table 2

Most Watched News & Current Affair Programs		
Program	Frequency	Percent
Political	132	42.6%
Crime	25	8.1%
Economy	34	11.0%
Entertainment	60	19.4%
Relegion	23	7.4%
Education	36	11.6%
Total	310	100

Results indicate that 56% of the respondents observe biasness in Geo news in terms of tone, language and presentations. The second most biased channel is Express news with a high difference of 25%.

Findings show that there is no relationship between frequency of watching channel and perceived credibility of the channel. As indicated in the results, Geo news is the most watched channel while audiences rated Geo news as the second most credible channel after Dunya news.

Table 3

Most Credible News Channel			Most Watched News Channel		
Channel	Frequency	Percent	Channel	Frequency	Percent
Geo News	71	22.9%	Geo News	111	35.8%
Dunya News	96	31.0%	Dunya News	65	21.0%
Aaj News	43	14.87%	Aaj News	40	12.9%
Ary News	15	4.83%	Ary News	12	3.9%
Express News	57	18.4%	Express News	62	20.0%
Sama News	20	6.5%	Sama News	20	6.5%

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

All the three tested variables like dramatic subject, soft news and breaking news appear to have substantial role in making the news and current affair programs sensational. 75% of the viewers observed sensationalism on these news channels as shown in Finding-2, Graph 1. Results show that the dramatic subject has an observable impact in motivating the factors of watching an item

as the second most watched news segment is entertainment news. These channels have the tendency to cover soft issues very frequently like sports, celebrity, entertainment, and crime, social and cultural issues. Table-1 shows that Geo has greater viewership and is rated as the most sensational channel as well. Positive association has been noted between perception of sensationalism and frequency of breaking news as shown in findings 3. Table-2 indicates no relationship has been observed between amount of watching channel and perceived credibility of the channel. It is assumed that the increase of sensationalism in news on these channels is relevant to media organizations due to the challenge of double task to keep grabbing and maintaining the viewers. Findings 4 show that Geo and Express news observed as news breaking channel considered biased news channels respectively. The practice of breaking news on these channels is being viewed to create hype and excitement to catch the maximum audiences as shown in findings 3. It is concluded that Geo is most watched news channel and most sensationalists at the same time. There is positive relationship between amount of watching news channel and existence of sensationalism. It is cleared that a huge quantum of soft news is being presented to hold the audiences. It is also concluded that sensationalism bears negative relationship with credibility of the channel. Express is the second most biased and sensational news channel after Geo News. It is also concluded that Dunya News is the most credible channel among all understudied channels.



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