

## Media, War and Peace: Towards Peace Journalism Strategies in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*In this article, the researchers have examined various factors that affect reporting of two deadly conflicts in Pakistan and identify peace-oriented strategies to help resolve these conflicts. For this purpose, comprehensive and inclusive interviews were conducted with reporters covering the Taliban conflict and the ethno-political conflict in Karachi. The researchers found that the nature of a conflict and threats from conflict stakeholders were the important factors that shape the production of conflict news. As far as peace journalism strategies are concerned, it was found that a more contextual way of reporting alongside humanization those sufferers would facilitate broader understanding and resolution of these conflicts in Pakistan.*

**Key Words:** Peace Journalism, Propaganda, Conflict Escalation, Terrorism, Structural and Ideological Factors, Semi-Structured Interviews.

## Introduction

Researchers have found that traditional media become nationalistic, propagandistic, escalatory and elite-oriented during wars and conflicts in modern political system. The voluminous amount of the available literature on the nexus between media and conflicts has significantly contributed to identify the wide range of factors like the strategic interests, patriotism and dominance of elite discourse that make media weapons of wars instead of objectively reporting on conflicts (Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Galtung, 2006). Likewise, in Pakistan, researchers have found the coverage of Taliban conflict in news media as inflammatory and nationalistic (Iqbal and Hussain, 2017; Hussain, 2014). Though the existing literature substantially contributes to unpack the complex nexus between war and media, however the nuances and contexts of conflict journalism that determines its (de)escalatory attributes have largely remained ignored. The researchers have mainly applied the quantitative content analysis technique to record the escalatory and de-escalatory trends in the media content. The research identifies that ideological and structural factors are important to influence journalists reporting in conflict area. This research also has been designed to conduct in-depth interviews with journalists covering a high-intensity conflict (Taliban conflict) and a low-intensity conflict (ethno-political conflict in Karachi).

This study is significant because media in Pakistani society are becoming powerful platforms of accountability. Due to weak institutions and fragile democratic setups, the usual mechanisms of addressing grievances of people are not functional in proper mechanism. Media on the other hand, have emerged as alternative platform to highlight the perspectives and issues of common people which has also contributed to increase audiences for the media. In fact, Pakistan now boasts a viable electronic media industry which has progressed rapidly in the past two decades especially after 9/11 incident. Earlier it was the government owned PTV and radio Pakistan that monopolized the industry almost for five decades or so. The government monopoly changed in the later part of 1990s when several local radio stations and private production houses were allowed to operate in the country. At present, as many as 110 Satellite TV Channels are giving 24/7 transmissions which are facilitated by over 2300 cable operators to provide information and entertainment to millions of households in Pakistan. Besides this, as many as 28 leading TV Channels from around the world are also operating in Pakistan.

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Though it is not the scope of this article to provide detailed analysis of issues in Karachi conflicts, however, a brief discussion is presented for better understanding of the patterns of media reporting.

## **Taliban Conflict**

Almost 19 years of long deadly conflict is the most dangerous conflict both in terms of human loss and national security of Pakistan. The Taliban conflict started when the Pakistani government decided to join the global alliance against terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks on the US. Taliban and Al Qaeda fugitives in Pakistan, Afghanistan and other neighboring countries started a guerilla war against the Pakistani military in Tribal Administered Areas of Pakistan. In the past 19 years, more than 80,000 people have been killed and many more injured along with billion dollars financial loss to the Government of Pakistan ([Hussain and Siraj, 2018](#)). The Pakistani media usually frame Taliban as national enemies and openly side with the government in this war ([Hussain and Siraj, 2018](#)).

## **Ethno-Political Conflict in Karachi**

The conflict in Karachi has its long historical roots in the birth of Pakistan when the local Sindhi population objected to the settlement of millions of Mohajir immigrants coming from India after the partition in 1947. Over the years, the Mohajir community became the largest group in the city. The massive exodus of Pashtoon community from the north of the country to Karachi further inflamed ethnic tension. The ethnic tension among the three communities worsened with the political process in 1970s ([Yusuf, 2012](#)). In the past two-decades more than 30,000 people have been killed in the city of Karachi (Rawan and Hussain, 2018).

At present, however, the ethno-political tension has receded after the Para-military operation against the major political party of the city—Muttahida Qaumi Movement and its fraction in different groups. The military wings of the different political parties, sectarian groups and criminal mafias are responsible for unrest in this city of Karachi ([Iqbal and Hussain, 2017](#)).

## **Determinants of Conflict Journalism**

Many researchers have worked on the identification of factors that determine media reporting during conflicts ([Allan & Zelizer, 2004](#); Hussain, 2017; [Galtung, 2006](#);) and have developed strategies to constructively use media for conflict de-escalation purpose. Researchers believe the changing nature of warfare, the perceived power of media, audiences' demands, limited budgets of media organizations, and partisan armed forces/governments lead towards war-oriented coverage. [Allan and Zelizer \(2004\)](#) found that journalistic autonomy is restricted by array of factors including security establishment, media policies, ownership patterns, relationship between editors and reporters and between marketing and management sections. Lynch (2013) has argued that personal attributes like level of knowledge and experience and professional attributes like perception about journalistic role performance determine the escalatory and de-escalatory potential of a conflict.

Herman and Chomsky (2010) believe public pressure is an important impediment to report freely and independently on conflicts. Journalists are also part of society and despite their best efforts could not dispense with professional reporting in case of public sensitivity.

Herman and Chomsky (2010) cite the example of Iraqi invasion by US where many independent journalists could not openly criticize the US government due to fear of being dubbed as unpatriotic and anarchist. Researchers [Hussain and Lynch \(2018\)](#) have discussed the media-conflict nexus from a critical pragmatic perspective. They have the opinions that in case of high threats to national security, institutional criticism becomes so powerful that the journalists openly support their government against the other groups. The institutional criticism makes it normal for journalists to avoid their professional responsibilities and become patriotic citizens of the state.

More generally, researchers have viewed that media content is shaped by many factors such as individual level of the journalist approach, media procedure and practice, organizational level, and the influence of ideology on journalist. The financial interests of a media company are the most important factor that pressurizes journalists to produce stories that increase the commercial benefits. Media are now driven by commercial logic and hence

the journalists have to come up with more dramatized and sensational news to engage larger audiences instead of informing them critically about the national affairs.

## **Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the important factors that influence the reporting of conflict against the Taliban fighters and the Karachi conflict?

RQ2: How the narrative of peace journalism strategies could be derived for more constructive reporting of the conflicts against the Taliban fighters and the conflict in Karachi?

## **Research Method**

To answer the two research questions, the researchers conducted comprehensive semi-structured interviews with 10 leading conflict expert journalists each for the Taliban and Karachi conflicts. These twenty journalists were working in the major news Television channels of Pakistan including Geo News, Dunya News, Samaa TV, Express TV, Khyber News, Aaj TV, 92 News, Channel 24, ARY News and Dawn News.

The selected reporters had beat assignments of reporting on these conflicts and had more than five years' field experience in the field of conflict reporting. All of them were male and at least a graduate degree. For Taliban conflict, the reporters were interviewed in Peshawar and for the Karachi conflict; the reporters were interviewed in Karachi. Most of the interviews were conducted at the Karachi and Peshawar press clubs. Several reporters were interviewed in their offices. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed into English by the researchers themselves.

## **Research Findings**

### **The Taliban Conflict**

All the ten reporters interviewed on the Taliban conflict agreed that their personal opinions and organizational policies influenced the reporting. They argued Taliban's were the 'national enemies' and hence they did not provide the same opportunity to highlight their perspective on the media. They feared that Taliban wanted to impose their rigid interpretation of Islam on the people through force which was unacceptable in the society. Hassan Khan, a senior reporter with Khyber TV said "we first are Pakistanis and then journalists. All of us have strong affiliations with this country and we respect the ideology and system of Pakistan. We are openly against the Taliban and would use our strength to defeat them and discredit them." Rasool Dawar from Geo TV said "The strong antipathy towards Taliban in the media prevents us from giving an objective account of the conflict. In fact, no one is interested in journalistic professionalism while reporting on this conflict".

Alongside the personal disliking for Taliban, another key factor that determines reporting of this conflict is the strong editorial policy which calls for showing open enmity towards the Taliban and Al-Qaida fugitives. Bilal Khan working for ARY TV said that journalism has changed now-a-days and everything was in the hands of media owners. Other reporters also agreed that media owners and organizations were dictating media policy and left journalists with little autonomy to report on their own on the conflict and issue related to national security of the state. Gohar Khan of Channel 24 said they were directed by the news organization to show patriotism and never let the Taliban use media for their objectives. He further revealed that, "Sometimes when we report on the statement of Taliban, we change the words that they use to ensure that nothing goes against the army".

However, majority of journalists agreed that they were not well prepared to report on this conflict as security forces did not allow them to go into affected areas in the tribal region of Pakistan. Journalists were depended on security forces for information through press releases which do not provide true and objective information. A reporter requesting anonymity said 'we have told about limits and we do not cross the red lines. Even we are disallowed to verify the information that military passes onto us'. Ateeq Mehsood working for Dawn News said journalists were working under very harsh circumstances. "If journalists do not follow the instructions (of security forces), they are warned, threatened and even killed. I know many reporters who have left the profession, some have left the country and some are living in other cities due to the displeasure of security forces of the country.

## **Strategy for Peace-Oriented Coverage**

According to [Hussain and Lynch \(2018\)](#), the practice and usage of peace journalism become more difficult in conflicts situation where threats to national security are perceived to be higher. As discussed earlier, in the Taliban conflict, the journalists are openly siding with the military and hence peace journalism is a challenge mostly in conflicts. Those who have more professional views are usually discredited for being pro-Taliban. Journalists consider it their professional duty to fight against the enemy--even ready to take arms. Anyone disagreeing is labeled as unpatriotic and sympathetic towards the enemy. Though the viewpoints of journalists varied on this issue, however they agreed on two strategies.

First, humanize the conflict by focusing on the issues and problems of suffering people. The media can highlight the plight of refugees, trauma, rehabilitation and repatriation of the people, and requirements like food, sanitation and health facilities at the camps in the conflict areas where refugees were staying. However, studies have shown that discussing the plight of refugees in conflict is considered unpatriotic in Pakistan ([Hussain, 2017](#); Hussain, 2014). Through slight changes in the narrative, the journalists agreed, it can be made possible. Journalist Hassan Khan stated that, "We should say that the millions of people are forced to live in camps due to the rising militancy in the regions instead of bluntly reporting that military operation is responsible for the problems of common tribal people".

The second peace journalism strategy as identified by the journalists was to provide the proper context of the conflict in the area. The conflict between the Taliban fighters and the Pakistan military is the most misreported conflict in Pakistan. The media reports usually ignore the history, background of this conflict. In fact, the Pakistani government has been involved in creating the Taliban during the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In those times, they were called as freedom fighters and the purpose was to fight against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The journalists have agreed such approach would balance the narrative of aggressive 'nationalism' in Pakistani media and convince people about the mistakes in the past which have done on the state level. Certain peace journalism scholars ([Galtung, 2006](#); [Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005](#); [Hussain and Lynch, 2018](#)) have argued that media could significantly contribute to de-escalation if contextual information is provided to the people of the state.

## **The Conflict in Karachi**

The reporting of conflict in Karachi has been the toughest challenge for Pakistani journalists ([Iqbal and Hussain, 2017](#)). In fact, analysts believe that this conflict is the worst reported due to challenges from the militant wings of political parties mainly the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, sectarian groups and big mafias (Lynch and Hussain, 2015). The prominent ten journalists were interviewed for this research and have agreed that their job was the most demanding one and confirmed that they all have been threatened multiple times in the line of their duties. In fact all of them requested anonymity due to fear from MQM, sectarian groups and mafias of the Karachi City.

A reporter from Dunya TV said, "Our hands are tied. No reporter can claim that she or he is free to report on the issue in the city". Another reporter from Geo TV said, "If the nation comes to know that what exactly is happening in this city, they would never forgive us for misreporting them. Many people have been killed and we could not report the real incidents due to the pressure from the political and armed mafias". They agreed it was the MQM that set the worst precedent of killing and intimidating the media and now most of political parties and other militant groups were involved in threatening journalists to dissuade them from negative reporting. When asked about the root causes of this conflict, they said the key issue was the greed to have a monopoly on the resources of the city. Initially, it was the MQM which denied to share political power with other parties and now many ethno-based political and non-political groups have emerged that are involved in fighting to maximize their share in the resources of the city.

## **Strategies for more Peace-Oriented Coverage**

The interviewees agreed on two broad thematic strategies for the constructive reporting of this conflict.

Firstly, the journalists agreed that media needed to depoliticize events in this conflict. They noted that the media was destructively reporting this conflict by maintaining a gap between the political and the non-political

victims. Constructive reporting would be to decline the political lenses through which the victims in this conflict are reported and they agreed it was doable and possible in the context of Karachi Conflict.

Secondly, the journalists agreed that good reporting of Karachi conflict would be to provide solution on how to resolve this conflict. One journalist said, “Our TV channels get higher public ratings when issues and events in Karachi city are reported because television audiences are highly concentrated in this city as compared to other cities in the country”. The reporter believed that solution-oriented programs are better placed to give constructive information to the people and at the same time would be effective for resolving the conflict. Another reporter opined that solution-oriented approach would get easy approval of the masses and added this “seems to be the most practical idea”.

A number of studies in the relevant scholarship in Pakistan support the above assertions ([Hussain, 2015 & 2016](#); [Hussain and Rehman, 2015](#)). These two strategies are generally considered as transition from passive to active peace journalism (Mao and Lee, 2005; Lee, 2010; Lynch, 2006).

## Conclusion

This research was designed to analyze the key factors that influence reporting of the Taliban and Karachi conflicts and also to identify strategies for their peaceful resolution or solution of the conflict. The Taliban conflict is recognized by media experts a major threat to the security of Pakistan which has brought unprecedented problems for the country and for Pakistanis security forces. Journalists are also disallowed by the Pakistani army to report freely on this conflict. One interesting finding gleaned from this study has been the explicit patriotism that rules the Pakistan media while reporting on this conflict. There exists strong antipathy towards the Taliban’s and journalists agree with the larger national discourse that the whole country needs to be united against the Taliban and defeat them. The journalists agree that professionalism was not required as the country was up against the enemy. They also agreed that if they wanted to report professionally on this conflict, the security forces would not allow and narrated many instances where reporters were killed or injured or threatened by the security forces for damaging the national security. Also, they opined that Pakistani people wanted defeating Taliban and common people would not appreciate professional and objective reporting of this conflict. Alongside the anti-Taliban sentiments, restrictions by the security forces to the war-zone and lack of training are other problems that hinder professional and constructive reporting of this conflict. When the journalists asked about the peace journalism model for this conflict, they identified two strategies to work in this regard. First, to highlight the problems and miseries of common masses in the city that was ignored so far Secondly, they said people would acquire a thorough understanding of this conflict if the context and background were also reported.

Likewise, the different political and non-political groups especially the MQM is a major hurdle in reporting constructively on the Karachi conflict. Journalists said they were harassed and threatened and could not report on the killings and mayhem engineered by the MQM. Unlike the ideological conflict with the Taliban, the Pakistani journalists said due to commercial reasons the powerful groups like MQM, sectarian groups and criminal mafias were not challenged by the media. Media is dependent on advertisements and these powerful groups enjoy a good amount of onus on the big businesses in Karachi. The opposing media is usually deprived of advertisement if they publish stories against certain groups in the city. About the more constructive and peace-oriented strategies for media, the journalists agreed if the conflict is reported in more humanized perspective and calls for peace, the media could facilitate resolution of this complex conflict of the country.

The research findings are relatively reliable with the existing literature available, which indicates that different factors determine reporting of different conflicts ([Galtung, 2006](#); [Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005](#); [Kemp, 2003](#); [Lee & Maslog, 2005](#); [Hussain, 2017](#)). If a conflict has ideological orientation like the Taliban conflict, journalists assume the ‘national responsibility’ role to defeat the enemy and do not care about journalistic professionalism (Hussain, 2016 and 2017). On the other hand, in case of conflict of low intensity where fears for national security are less, journalists try to be objective and professional but conflict stakeholders usually disallow free reporting ([Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005](#); [Iqbal and Hussain, 2017](#)). Particularly in Pakistan where media system is not very strong and institutional mechanisms are weak, the stakeholders usually prevail and media subdued as in case of Karachi conflict.

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