

The Empty Bulletins and Profitable Narratives: Understanding Structural Elimination of Coverage of Public Issues by Pakistani Media; A Reporters' Perspective

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The literature about journalistic practices denotes how owner-oriented pursuit of financial and political benefits, structurally de-power the reporters, an exclusive connection of any media organization to the public, to cover issues of public interest. While this study intends to examine the phenomenon of Pakistani media's elite-centric operational approach, particularly in electronic media, where it promotes 'profitable narratives' and systematically excludes coverage of genuine public issues. The study employed a qualitative research design inquire the experiences and constraints encountered by reporters in mainstream leading news channels in Pakistan. Using semi-structured interviews, responses were gathered from eight journalists, one from each news channel, to examine the complexities shaping media practices in Pakistan. The findings suggest that a consideration in positive directions can lead to a reevaluation of media structures, promoting greater accountability and transparency in the media's role in shaping public discourse and societal progress.

1. Introduction

The Pakistani mass media scenario has undergone substantial growth in the last two decades, with more than 90 Satellite TV Channels, 4983 cable operators, 34 landing TV Channels from abroad such as BBC and CNN, and 210 FM Radio Stations now operating in the country (Ministry of Planning and Development, 2018). Recently, PEMRA, the national broadcasting regulator has issued 140 licenses for satellite Television Channels since 2022 (APP, 2023). These numbers represent a promising picture of the Pakistani media landscape especially when these mainstream media outlets have over time presented themselves as entities at public service. As they use slogans and metaphors while producing promotional videos representing themselves as the voice of the people. These channels claim themselves as platforms where the public can voice out themselves and ruling elite will be answerable to their voices (PublicTV, 2020). ‘Masiah’ for underprivileged that can influence political decision-making and ensure that those in positions of authority are responsive to the needs and interests of the voiceless, becoming active public spheres, a concept by Habermas (1962), defined as a space where powerful and underprivileged comes to discussion.

Although in terms of the size, glitter and uproar, apparently, the Pakistani media landscape gives an illusion of such thriving public sphere, however, just a critical glance on the content of the media points out the fact that today’s Pakistani TV journalism is neglecting important content that could have advocated for the struggles of the common people to the government. This neglect is not a naïve procedural error but a product of a relentless pursuit of profitable narratives i.e. narratives that can yield the media entity a political and economic fortune. It must be taken in the contextual view that media is a part of cultural industries and industry is poised to function as a profit-making entity in a socio-economic setting (Hesmondhalgh, 2010).

Media as industry produces socio-political, religious, legal and other narratives as products competing in a social market thus creating a race for political influence and financial profits. Thus, the commercial media bound by the politico-economic demands always eye on these profitable narratives. For this purpose, they just want to conform to the elitist narratives and don’t want to be critical towards them, fearing their regressive actions (Hassan et al., 2020). While doing so, media has diverged its attention from the issues of public interest and do not allow such narratives that can disturb the socio-political elites yielding lesser leverage for media houses. This phenomenon has ended up yielding round-the-clock, empty bulletins, lacking reportage on issues of common people. In a country with elite capture in every walk of life (Dwyer, 2016), the media though producing bulletins based on the news from their reporters, structurally eliminates stories of public good not only to avoid constructing a controversial image of the elite instead. They frame the public issues in a way that portrays elites as actively working for the welfare of society lacking focus on issues of public interest such as health and education governance or issues faced by underprivileged farmers (Kabir, 2023). This lack of attention from issues of public interests is clear from several studies showing that the mainstream Pakistani media is giving excessive coverage to non-issues, while not giving enough coverage to underprivileged voices (Kamboh, 2019). For

example, there is a disproportionate focus on content like local politicians' propaganda, press releases by ministries, embedded journalism, and sensational news stories about crime, entertainment, and sports. It is noted that this pattern of coverage is structural and is carried by the media houses due to their preference of profitable narratives, the stories that yield them politico-economic influence, at the expense of the representation of the individuals to whom media commits to stand by.

As Farooq (2022) notes, with the rise of electronic media, traditional media organizations have experienced significant structural transformations in terms of their control mechanisms. Nevertheless, the commitment to serve the financial interests of the media house or its proprietors has remained the same over time. As Abbas (2024) notes, in a structured way, the media is suppressing meaningful citizen-state dialogue as Pakistani electronic media, tends to prioritize such media content that is commercially or politically advantageous over essential public issues like educational and social development projects, reflecting an elite-centric approach. During this course of elite-oriented industrial production of profitable narratives, reporters are among the first and foremost casualty. Since the production of content follows the top-down approach to maintain strict control, gradually but significantly, TV reporters in Pakistan have lost their say in decision-making and reporting choices. In Pakistan, reporters are bound by the limitations imposed by the financial, political, and social interests of their employing organization (Farooq, 2022). At times, these interests are overtly advocated by the organization's management, while at other times they are subtly implied. Often, these financial objectives are cloaked in ideological rhetoric. In this structural setting, reporters in Pakistani media have been rendered defunct organs just coming to duty as any factory workers come.

As Naseem (2022) argues owners of media entities use news content as a tool to maintain their survival and commercial advancement. This positions the reporters, who are the life line for the channel, not more than mercenaries ready to kill when required by the masters. This implies that the growing commercialization of media has elevated the influence of media owners and advertisers while diminishing that of journalists (Hamilton, 2004). Educationists and media critics pointed out that this has created a void of exclusive reporting, depriving the people of the truth and their right to know (Hassan, 2011). It means that reporters are just employed to read press releases and handouts of government and other powerful stakeholders on screen. This trend raises concerns about the media's influence on public discourse in a democratic governance and societal progress at large. As Reese (1990) noted that existing research highlights the media 's structural coverage of news vis a vis ownership there is a gap in understanding how field reporters are structurally impeded from covering and conducting exclusive reporting on the issues of public importance by denying them resources and allowance. This question is still unaddressed in Pakistani context. This is important to note that these impediments faced by reporters are structural, invisible, nuanced and often guised as an organizational policy thus surviving critical scrutiny in research and media discourse. Thus this study aims to investigate the extent of the barriers faced by field reporters in

Pakistani media in course of organizational prioritization of profitable narratives and, providing insights for reevaluating media structures and practices.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to examine the phenomenon of Pakistani media's elite-centric operational approach, particularly in electronic media, where it promotes 'profitable narratives' and systematically excludes coverage of genuine public issues. The study aims to understand how owner-oriented pursuit of financial and political benefits, structurally de-power the reporters, an exclusive connection of any media organization to the public, to cover issues of public interest. Through this investigation, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the structural problems in Pakistani media's function and its impact in shaping public discourse and its societal impact.

1.2 Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to shed light on the structural pursuit of elite-centric profitable narratives over essential public issues by Pakistani media, particularly electronic media that has rendered the reporters as a defunct organ of Pakistani news organizations. With just a facade of exclusive reporting, the media has become just a mouthpiece of elites. Understanding these dynamics through the reporter's perspective can reveal the current state of media credibility. It can lead to a reevaluation of media structures, promoting greater accountability and transparency in the media's role in shaping public discourse and societal progress.

1.3 Research Questions

1. Is the electronic media of Pakistan structurally eliminating the space for coverage of genuine issues of a common man and pursuing profitable narratives?
2. How does the pursuit of profitable narratives by media organizations shape the selection and extermination of coverage of public interest issues in Pakistani electronic media?
3. Has the prioritization of profitable narratives transformed reporters into passive participants within the media ecosystem, limiting their ability to engage in independent and investigative journalism?

2. Literature Review

In theory, at least, it is argued that governments gain feedback and acquire public reaction towards their governance policies and programs through media. As Habermas (1962) indeed emphasizes that one of the key functions of the public sphere is to hold the powerful accountable. In his theory, the public sphere serves as a space where citizens can come together to discuss and debate matters of common concern, including the actions and policies of those in power. Through open and critical discourse, individuals can form public opinion, which can then influence political decision-making and ensure that those in positions of authority are responsive to the needs and

interests of the broader society terms it as the public sphere where powerful and underprivileged come to discussion. Journalism able to perform the role of a public sphere can claim itself to fulfill the role of public service. Indeed, one of the noblest ideals in journalism is the concept of "public service," which can be defined as a commitment to acting in the best interests of the community rather than pursuing self-serving or dishonest motives. To describe oneself as a public servant in journalism is to declare a dedication to civic service, with the aim of serving the public good rather than personal interests (Coleman, 2014). As argued by many scholars (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1992; Althaus, 2002)) the media play a crucial role in determining which issues are prominent for the public, essentially imprinting the identity of actors or interests competing for dominance in the text. As Eijaz (2012) notes that media content serves as a window into the producers and organizations behind it, shedding light on less overt and visible phenomena. It is not created in isolation; rather, it is influenced by a number of factors including consumer demands, organizational dynamics, external influences, and social processes (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Media outlets are integral parts of communities, and their content is inherently linked to the societies they operate. Through the "schemata of interpretation," media consumers construct their understanding of these issues. Additionally, the media decide which stories and events should be brought to the readers' attention, which means that the reality they construct may not always align with objective truth but rather reflect the perspectives of those involved in the news selection process. Among the most important groups with the potential to influence the news are journalists, media owners, politicians, interest groups, advertisers, and the audience (Bennett, 2011). Scholars (McManus, 1997; Kamboh, 2019) argue that as journalism becomes more commercialized, it has led to the rise of political infotainment, sensationalism, and a soap opera-like portrayal of democratic politics, a process often termed as "dumbing down." This shift is criticized for focusing more on trivial matters, like politicians' personal lives and making them look into public service rather than substantive issues like economic policy, health and educational governance, and foreign affairs, thus lowering the standards of journalism and undermining democracy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). But the core notion is that now journalism in general and journalism in particular is less about democratic scrutiny and accountability of the political elite than it is a vehicle for the "necessary illusions", characterized by the continued presence of an unequal and exploitative capitalist system (Chomsky, 1989).

This implies that the growing commercialization of media has elevated the influence of media owners and advertisers while diminishing that of journalists (Hamilton, 2004). Journalists serve as mediators and representatives of the public, bridging the gap between citizens and politicians (McNair, 2003). They ensure that the public's voice is effectively communicated to those in power, advocating for the public's interests and holding the powerful accountable. Media owners openly align with political parties and use their platforms to promote specific agendas at the expense of collective common (Hassan et al., 2022: Sajjad, 2021). In many newsrooms, reporters are discouraged from initiating critical coverage and exclusive stories exposing major advertisers such as car dealers, realtors, or grocery chains that becomes embedded in organizational culture which often dictates that such topics are beyond the resources or the proper

scope of news, leading to limitations on reporters' autonomy set by media firm executives (Reese, 1990). This process seemingly legitimizes the authority of the elite. Media, to be a partner in the elite's share of fortune become their promoter (Kabir, 2023).

Pakistani electronic media is plagued with the same situation. As Raza (2012) notes numerous studies have raised objections concerning Pakistani media in terms of coverage of trivial events in more details, and airing/publishing homogenous news content. Kamboh (2019) argues that today's Pakistani journalism is neglecting important content that could advocate for the struggles of the common people to the government and promote a better understanding of sustainable development among stakeholders. This lack of attention is clear from several studies showing that the mainstream Pakistani media is giving excessive coverage to non-issues, while not giving enough coverage to underprivileged voices. Growing numbers believe mainstream media hinder progressive change; in Pakistan, media lacks self-critique, serving power structures and allied interests over public opinion (Arif, 2021). Current conditions in Pakistani journalism do not prioritize the public interest. Job insecurity and commercial pressures limit journalists' ability to practice independent journalism. A 2013 report by the Nonprofit Media Working Group revealed that topics like education, local government accountability, health, and the environment, despite their societal importance, are often the first to be neglected due to high costs (MORE, 2013). It is argued that the owner's authority supersedes that of the journalist's role, leading the journalist to become a decision-taker rather than the natural role of a decision-maker (McManus, 1997). In Pakistan, journalists are bound by the limitations imposed by the financial interests of their employing organization. At times, these interests are overtly propagated by the organization's management, while at other times they are subtly implied. Often, these financial objectives are cloaked in ideological rhetoric (Farooq, 2022) or hierarchical instructions for instance.

As notes Rehmat (2019) Pakistani media, under financial pressure due to a flawed business model, concentration of ownership, and political infighting is squeezing and is shifting the crunch to the journalist. As economic system under which media operates, demands increasingly higher profit margins, resulting in fewer journalists being tasked with more work making them skip socially proactive journalism which demands more professional and personal consumption. This trend undermines the provision of news that serves the public interest (Fenton, 2011). To address the scarcity of reporters in comparison to the work, news channels can reassign reporters from less important stories to cover news which has more value to the business targets of the organization, ensuring coverage of significant events despite limited resources. However, this management of reporters comes at the expense of stories that may be more important for the public (Tuchman, 1973).

People feel a genuine sense of loss for independent reporting that offers information, investigation, and analysis in local affairs coverage (Natalie, 2009). Particularly Pakistani audiences want insights into the motivations behind the actions of government and private interests and are disappointed on what media is doing (Gallup, 2023). This watchdog function of the news remains central to people's expectations from news services. This very basic expectation is fulfilled

by the reporters in Media as they perform as an exclusive voice of their respective channel bringing unique information, valuable insights, and innovative investigation for their audience who want to know beyond the press release journalism (Frost, 2002). In commercial media news operations run with a top-down approach separating the intellectual and physical labor leaving the reporter's sole purpose remains there to provide physical labour in masking the PR campaigns as independent journalistic evaluation (Yeşilyurt, 2014). This is the commodification of news coverage operations for profitable ends. This is internalized and imposed as a form of organizational policy. Individual journalists also work according to highly structured professional routines that shape their coverage. Such routines and practices are normalized and are made part of the organizational structures with time, such practices become objectified, understood as 'how things work' rather than calculated corporate responses to profit targets (Jansen, 2017). Due to ownership-led, elite-oriented news operations reporters become irrelevant in the news cycle and as argued by that under the clutches of corporatist media structure, their ability to shape up the scope of news coverage diminishes. This elitist de-powering of reporters has a far more negative implication than normally thought. As Fenton (2011) argues this commodification of news as a product of market activity has eroded its value and its role in democracy. Baker (2001) notes several potential objections to relying solely on market identification and measurement of preferences. Firstly, market measures can be flawed as they tend to prioritize commoditized forms of communication, overlooking preferences for non-commoditized content. Secondly, market measures often focus on expressions within a specific context, which may not fully capture diverse preferences. Lastly, the market's criterion of willingness and ability to pay may not be egalitarian, leading to an inadequate reflection of true preferences. Thus, if the market fails to accurately identify or prioritize preferences, it cannot be expected to effectively deliver content that meets people's needs. In short market-oriented pursuit of profitable media products will cost the underprivileged sections of the society failing the social responsibility that media claims.

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study uses the News production theory. This theory explores how the routines, practices, and organizational constraints of newsrooms shape the news we see. In Pakistani media, a top-down approach to journalistic decision-making, driven by the interests of media owners and the pursuit of profit has turned the media into an outlet for elite narratives as this practice conforms with the standards of socio-economic well-being. This shift has sidelined reporters, reducing their role to merely rebranding press releases from powerful entities as news. As a result, genuine reporting has been replaced by PR campaigns, leaving little room for journalism, critical, independent journalism of public interest.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design. This approach provided an in-depth exploration of the experiences and constraints encountered by reporters within 8 news channels of

a category in the country. Using semi-structured interviews, a study on the structural research gathered insights from 8 journalists, offering a comprehensive examination of the complexities shaping media practices in Pakistan. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture a rich understanding of these challenges, ensuring a thorough analysis of the issues at hand.

4. Results

4.1 Background details of the Participating Reporters

4.1.1 Ume Farwa, GEO TV- Respondant 1

Ume Farwa is currently working as a reporter with Geo TV, Pakistan's biggest private Media group. Aged 40, Farwa has extensive experience of more than 15 years in TV reporting with health as a major beat. She has been reporting in a beat that is till now most neglected beat in terms of news placement in a bulletin while the country is plagued with health crises. She holds an MPhil degree and is a known name for health reporting in Lahore.

4.1.2 Salman Tariq-Dunya TV- Respondent 2

Salman Tariq is a broadcast journalist associated with Dunya TV. As a TV reporter, he has been working for Duniya TV for the last 8 years. He covers the political beat, especially the provincial assembly. He has extensive experience working in Pakistani media for more than 10 years as he has also an experience of working in Pakistani Print Media. Aged 35 years Salman holds an honor in statistics and does political reporting. Salman belongs to a Middle-class family that is associated with journalism. Salman's father has headed many prestigious news publications on the national level.

4.1.3 Javed Farooqi- Sama TV Respondent 3

More than 28 years of experience, Jave Farooqi, is Pakistan's veteran TV reporter. Hailing from a family of journalists, Javed Farooqi is a specialized Reporter in economic affairs as he has reported news from economic beat for different TV Channels. Starting career in Print Media, Javed Farooqi has done exclusive reporting for Pakistan's prestigious TV channels, including Geo, Express, GNN and Samma. His brother is also the editor of a national newspaper, a subsidiary of the Jang group. In his latest decade of reporting he also worked in the political beat of reporting and has proved his mettle. He covered the Pakistan People's Party for a long.

4.1.4 Shahrukh Nadeem 24 News HD Respondent 4

Shahrukh Nadeem is a TV reporter who is associated with the 24HD a national TV owned by Mohsin Naqvi, an influential Media tycoon and current interior Minister of the country. Shahrukh has, as reporter experience of 9 years and has been associated with the city district beat. The city district beat is directly concerned with the issue of the public as reporters cover local bodies and scrutinize their performance. Shahrukh 33 years of age holds a Master in journalism and belongs to an upper middle-class family.

4.1.5 Syed Sabih Ul Hassan- Lahore News Respondent 5

A crime reporter who has also been covering Punjab Food Authority, Syed Sabihul Hassan has an ample experience in reporting for city-based TVs. He works at Lahore News, a subsidiary of Dunya Media group, owned by an education turned property tycoon, Mian Amir. Mian Amir had been politically active and had served as Nazim (Mayor Lahore). Sabih has been associated to one other city-based channel City42. He belongs to an upper-middle-class family and holds a master's in business studies. He claims himself an accidental journalist. A passionate journalist, Sabih has been doing crime reporting for 10 years now. Although he works for a city-based channel but reason to choose him is that the city-based channels are closer to their local audience, making the news more interesting and relevant. Authorities respond faster because the news affects the local people quickly. This helps TV owners use the station for their benefit, taking advantage of the quick response the authorities.

4.1.6 Wasi Nadeem-Talon News respondent 6

Wasi Nadeem holds a gold medal in Master's in Mass Communication. He is in his 11th year of experience as he joined the media in 2013. He has covered education beat and is also a policy commentator for British Council educational training programs. Hailing from a far flung district of south Punjab, Layyah, He is associated with Talon News a relatively nascent TV channel, owned by the individuals affiliated with ruling Party in Sindh province.

4.1.7 Ahmed Hassan-GNN Respondent 7

Relatively younger journalist Ahmed Hassan hails from an upper-middle-class family. His ancestral occupation has been the armed forces. Ahmed a Media and Mass Communication graduate is affiliated with GNN TV as a ministerial beat reporter. He covers agriculture, irrigation, and food ministries. Crucial for the public's prosperity and growth. He has an experience of 3 years in media. Choosing him is reasoned as the need for a perspective from an early-career reporter and get a wider picture of the topic under research. His beats of reporting also served as another reason for his selection as a respondent.

4.1.8 Zunaira Illyas-GTV Respondent 8

Zunaira Illyas is a lady reporter who has been doing women-oriented beats for last 8 years. Among the institutions and organizations, she covers the Women Protection Authority, Women Chamber of Commerce, and Darul Aman are a few among them. Associated with GTV, a Karachi-based TV, she has won the 'marvelous women in media' award for 2021 by the Lahore Chamber of Commerce women's wing. She has served in Lahore for years and now she has relocated herself to Karachi. Aged 36, Zunaira joined media after completing her M.Phil. in Mass Communication. Zunaira is married and is planning to move abroad in coming years.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection involved in-depth interviews with 8 journalists from various prominent news channels, named Umm e farwa Geo TV, Shahrukh Nadeem, Reporter C42 Network, Javed Farooqi Salman Tariq Dunya TV, Syed Sabih ul Hassan, Lahore News, Zunaira Ilyas GTV, Ahmed Hassan GNN, Wasi Nadeem Talon News. Semi-structured questions allowed for a balance between predefined areas of question and the opportunity for participants to share unique experiences and perspectives. The diverse sample aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and dynamics in Pakistan's media landscape. The study focused on uncovering insights into editorial control, self-censorship, external pressures, role of a reporter in any TV channel, and the prioritization of profitable narratives over essential public issues within the media industry.

4.3 Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling to select reporters from various news channels in Pakistan, including Geo TV, Samma TV, Dunya TV, GNN, Lahore News, Talon News, GTV, and C42. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure the selection of participants who could provide diverse and relevant insights into the structural challenges faced by journalists. Furthermore, it must be noted that the rationale of employing the technique involves selecting participants based on specific criteria i.e Reporters having experience in covering political news as well as news from beats that are less prioritized in news bulletins for example, health, education, municipal services, agriculture, and irrigation. Included cohort has experience ranging 30 years and reporters in their early careers were chosen to have a diverse range of experiences. This selection criterion helped the researcher to get unique perspectives on editorial dynamics, self-censorship practices, external influences, and the prioritization of profitable narratives. For this purpose, senior reporters. This approach allowed for a focused and targeted yet broad investigation, enhancing the depth and richness of the study's findings by drawing on the diverse experiences and perspectives of reporters working within the Pakistani media landscape.

4.4 Discussion and analysis

The data obtained in the form of interviews was segregated into seven themes. In this study, eight electronic media reporters participated, providing a range of perspectives and experiences regarding the structural prioritization of profitable narratives over essential public issues. By categorizing their responses thematically, the research can more effectively highlight key issues, trends, and relationships within the data. This approach not only aids in structuring and managing large volumes of qualitative data but also enhances the depth and richness of the analysis, ensuring that the findings are coherent, comprehensive, and meaningful.

These include seven themes derived from interview questions:

4.4.1 Factors Influencing Story Selection

- Factors affecting story choice

- Pressure to cover high viewership or agenda-driven stories

4.4.2 Editorial Control and Censorship

- Top-down editorial control
- Limitations on journalistic judgment by reporters
- Discouragement from covering sensitive topics

4.4.3 Public Interest vs. Political and Economic Agendas

- Elite-centric media coverage
- Coverage of marginalized communities

4.4.4 Resource Allocation and Prioritization

- Resource allocation for events
- Denial of resources for public interest stories

4.4.5 Challenges in Investigative Journalism

- Empowerment to hold powerful entities accountable
- Challenges in covering critical stories

4.4.6 Reporter's position Vis a Vis Autonomy and Job Satisfaction

- Limitations on pursuing stories
- Reporter frustrations and autonomy
- Value of a Reporter in media structure

4.4.7 Ethical Dilemmas and Compromises

- Fabrication of stories
- Use of news for political and economic benefits

4.5 Theme 1: Factors Influencing Story Selection

Discussion about Factors affecting story selection produced that TV channels in Pakistan have a very strict news production control. That controlled structure devised by the owners dictates the choice of the stories. Interviews established the fact that the influence of ownership on mass media content is significant. It is obvious that in market-based media, owners possess ultimate authority over content and can dictate what should be included or excluded (McQuail, 2010). Respondents were of the view that any story even of public importance usually waits for any political angle in

it otherwise don't survive the profitable narrative test. As respondent 3, Javed Farooqi from SAMMA news states:

News bulletins men syasat aur syasi khabren sab sy pehli tarjeeh hoti hy. Sab sy zyada hisa political players ki khabron ka hota hy. Media men ye Aam khyal kia jata hy k awam syasi mamlat k baray men janna chatey hen. al k yun kaha jaye k smaaji masyaal awami issues intezaar krtay reh jatay hen k kab un k zikar koi Top syastadan karay to un per bhi nazar paray media ki. Kiun k jab tak political angle na ajiye jab tak koi syastadan na zikar kray kisi msly ka wo media k liay worth nae rkhta.

Politics and political news are the first priority in news bulletins. Most of the news is about political players. It is generally assumed in the media that the public wants to know about political issues. It is also a sad aspect of the reality that social problems and public issues wait for the attention of the media till a top politician mentions them. Because until the political angle comes, issues don't become worthy for media.

Another aspect of the situation is that news story has to survive different censorship tests before surviving to the screen. As all of the respondents said channels kill the stories that can make the military, and business establishment angry. The story against the friends and coronaries of the Media Saiths, the media owners, will also neither covered nor air. Interests of the advertisers will impact the bulletin or at least the reportage of the public issues. As respondent 4, Shahrkh Nadeem from C42 said

“Establishment waghera ko tau choro, hmian to ye pta hota hy k Khawaja Imran Nazeer kay khilaf nae chalay ga kuch, Mian Aslam Iqbal kay khilaf khabar nae chalay ge boss (the owner who happens to be the federal Minister now) k sath direct hy inki”

But Respondent 5 Syed Sabih ul Hassan Reporter Lahore News also noted that coverage of the issues of public we often see on screens is driven as well. Ratings push the media channels to give common people space in their bulletin. But he agreed that often the motive behind this coverage is agenda-driven in which some score has to be settled against any power player.

“Ye zaroor hey, kay ye jo coverage k doran kisi msly ko issue of the day bnany ki koishih hoti hy ye kisi power player kay kilaf he hota hy”

This true that any issue related to the public is tried to be made as an issue of the day but that too is done due to political agenda against any power player.

Respondent 2 Salman Tariq-Dunya Tv added that the role of reporters in story selection has been significantly minimized. He jokingly alludes to the state of reporters to defunct genitals. Reporters have limited influence over which stories are chosen for broadcast, as decisions are heavily influenced by higher management and editorial staff. This marginalization reduces the ability of reporters to pursue stories they believe are important or in the public interest:

"Story selection men reporter ka role minimize kr dya gya hy. Ab hum reporter's siraf aik uzwe tanasal hen, men tau yei kehta hu is baray me"

Reporter's role in the story selection has been minimized. Now we are only defunct (male) genital organs. That's what I say in this regard.

Respondent 8 Zaunaira Ilyas from GTV Complained about the lack of transparency and concealment of the truth in editorial decisions while selecting or rejecting the news story. She says

"Han ye to hemsha hota hy, aisi non journalistic cheezen hoti hen jin ko istemal kr k roka jata hy jo bazahir to bohathe serious si bari flowery si terms hoti hen, k policy hey, national interest hey ye keh dya jata hy jab bhi hum higher ups sy bat krtay hen k story kiun nae chlay ge. Lekin phir hmen to pta hota hy k garbar andr khatay kisi na kisi ko pura krna hy"

Always there have been the grounds which are non-journalistic, shady and unethical, in theory at least, that we confront whenever debate arises on any story with higher-ups. These reasons and logics are often wrapped in flowery terminologies of policy, social and national interest but we could smell the rat.

So this is evident from the discussion of the reporters that this centralized control over news production means that editorial decisions are not transparent, are driven by a combination of political, economic, and personal interests of the media owners and their affiliations. Consequently, the media landscape in Pakistan is significantly compromised, with the most pressing public issues often being overlooked unless they serve a larger agenda or provide some form of benefit to the media house. This not only undermines the principles of journalism but also erodes public trust in the media as a source of unbiased information.

4.6 Editorial Control and Censorship

Respondents answered it while pointing out the issues in editorial judgment and control that yield considerable structural censorship. A centralized, corporate-styled line of action, makes sure that certain narratives get to the screen. This centralized system not only dictates what gets reported but also shapes the narrative of how stories are presented, ensuring alignment with the interests of powerful stakeholders, often called the policy. The lack of transparency in editorial decisions is a significant concern voiced by the majority of the respondents. Decisions about which stories to publish or censor are often made if not behind closed doors, with little to no input from the reporters themselves. This opacity not only frustrates journalists but also undermines the credibility of the media.

"Wo seedha kehtay hen k bhai jan ye story hy aisy karni hey, kardo bas. Humaray men aur biscuit banany wali company k supervisor men koi fark nahe hey"

One of the respondent said that it is very common that they straightforwardly say, "Brother, this is the story, do it this way, just get it done." There's no difference between us and a supervisor in a biscuit-making company.

Another respondent sums the whole story up.

"Reporter ka jo traditional kam tha khbar dhoond k lana ab wo khabar bnanay ka reh gya hy. Ye bohat bari tabdeeli hey professional requirement paradigm ki. Ab agenda driven bari tadad men guftugu hoti hey aur is ko koi nahi roka"

The traditional job of a reporter, which was to find news, has now been reduced to creating news. This is a big change in the professional requirement paradigm. Now, there is a large amount of agenda-driven discussion, and no one stops it.

Ahmed Hassan from GNN narrated an incident where he was asked to cover a story on ration bags distributed by Punjab government of PMLN, carrying the picture of PMLN's supremo Nawaz Sharif. He also found while doing his investigations that this project had corruption as well. When he completed the story it was struck down on the ground that it is too anti-government. When he tried to negotiate the reasons for the rejection of the story he was blankly told that this is the policy as powerful circles have barred us from airing anything detrimental to Maryum Nawaz's image. .

"Mjhy kaha gya k policy hey bhai kia kren, meray pas messages paray hen CNR kay kiun kay mera package bureau sy hogya tha file lekin CNR ney kaha k takatwar halqon ny ye rok dya hy Maryum k khilaf abhi kuch nae chal skta is level ka' he said."

Respondent 5 described the reaction of the reporters to this situation saying

"Hum nay kia krna hy? Hum kuch nae kr skty. Nokar ki tay nakhra ki' koi ehtjaj nae krta, sahafyn ki tanzeemen media owners k kehna per chlti hen Pakistan men."

What we can do? We cannot do anything, who counts the servant in? Journalist associations now act on whims of media owners in Pakistan.

It is obvious that stringent control over story selection in Pakistani electronic media, as discussed in the first theme, inevitably extends to broader editorial practices, manifesting as pervasive editorial control and censorship. This centralized system not only dictates what gets reported but also shapes the narrative of how stories are presented, ensuring alignment with the interests of powerful stakeholders. This process effectively stifles journalistic freedom, as reporters find their work heavily scrutinized and frequently altered to avoid offending these influential groups.

4.7 Theme 3:- Public Interest vs. Political and monetary Agendas

All respondents agreed that Pakistan's mainstream media is a form of business and the business's over all pursuit is to maximize its profitable existence. In the media business, profits are gauged in terms of financial as well as power equations. As Respondent 6 noted

"Humain is baat ka to ab pta hey na k ye business hen, business aur kia kray ga? Apnay interests he barhaye ga. Ye shafti dukanen ban chuken hen"

Now we know this fact that these are businesses, what business will do else? They will increase their own interest. They have become journalistic shops.

Respondant 1 laments the situation:

"Ab channels karobar kr rhay hen aur karobar men har waqt munafa he chiay. Yei wja hey k woe chlay ga jo economically aur politically viable ho profitable ho tau bas agendas chaltay he aur awami masael per news stories tau bulletins men bohat peechay reh gayen hen."

Now channels are running a business, and in business, profit is needed all the time. This is why what runs is what is economically and politically viable and profitable. Thus, agendas prevail, and news stories on public issues have been pushed far back in the bulletins.

Respondent No 4 argues that the bulletins of the channels are empty of genuine public interest reporting, giving voices to their issues in a meaningful manner. As she explains the technical workflow of this structural elimination of the news, she says that if a news is given place in a bulletin for few seconds that is not the coverage that is just filling in or per functionary coverage.

"Itnay issues hotay hen roz jo k genuine public interest hota hy un ko chand seconds men guzara jata hy agar cover ho k chal bhi jayen, sab sy zyada kia screne per hota hhy, wazeer e ala ney ye kardya, uski is sy mulaqat hogae, koi aham shaksyat mil gaye. Bas aik aik minute men kae khabren chla k khatam jin men kisi sarak koi school, koi pani ka msla hota hy discuss"

There are so many issues every day that are of genuine public interest, but they are covered in just a few seconds, if at all. What gets the most screen time? The Chief Minister did this, met with that person, or some important personality visited. Just in a minute, several news stories are run and done with, including those discussing issues like a road, a school, or a water problem.

On the other hand, respondent 2 thought that Public issues are always covered such as Inflation, or any protest. But he also agrees that they are covered till the point some powerful is not named directly.

"Cover to hota hy ye nae hota kay cover he na ho, mehngai ka msla, sfai ka msla jesay, lekin han direct nam nahi liay jatay tab tak to cover hota hy"

It does get covered; it's not that it doesn't get covered at all. Issues like inflation and cleanliness are covered, but yes, direct names are not mentioned until then

In the light of responses above it must be noted that the ultimate casualty in this game of power and profit is the public's right to know. Unbiased information is essential for informed decision-making, and fostering a healthy democracy. When the media fails to provide this vital service, public discourse weakens, and critical issues are swept under the rug. The lack of diverse viewpoints and in-depth investigations creates an echo chamber, hindering the public's ability to critically analyze information and hold power structures accountable. The media's alignment with political and economic agendas is not merely a passive occurrence but an active strategy. Media owners leverage their platforms to gain political influence and economic benefits, shaping public opinion to serve their interests. This manipulation of news content distorts reality, presenting a version of events that suits the needs of those in power. The resulting information asymmetry leaves the public unable to make well-informed decisions, undermining democratic processes and perpetuating a cycle of misinformation and manipulation.

For example, while covering political rallies or statements by prominent leaders can boost viewership ratings, it often overshadows pressing issues like environmental degradation, public health crises, or educational reforms. The constant emphasis on political drama and elite-centric narratives distracts the audience from the real problems that need attention and action. As a result, policies and decisions that could benefit the broader public remain underreported and undervalued.

4.8 Resource Allocation a Strategic Tool for Prioritization of Coverage

All of the respondents agreed that media channels often provide limited resources to reporters, significantly impacting their ability to cover a wide range of stories, particularly those that might lead to political or economic consequences for the organization. These resources include essential coverage equipment such as cameras, transport, and live broadcasting tools like Digital Satellite News Gathering (DSNG) units, which are costly to operate.

As Respondant 8 describes

“Hum jab koi story aisi batatay hen jis ka mood nae hota hmaray newsrooms ka tau kehtay hen story achi hey lekin yar abhi camera gari available nae hy aaj jao ye jalsa cover kr lo Maryum arahi hy Imran Khan aye ga aur ye apni story kal kar lena aur wok al nae ati kabhi bhi”

Whenever we ask our newsroom to provide with the resources to cover a story (Idea given by the reporter) they even appreciate the story idea but blame the shortage of equipment , camera and transport while assigning us a political activity mentioning any political figure participating in the rally. While they put our story on tomorrow, tomorrow that never comes’.

As this is evident that the strategic allocation of these resources often reveals an underlying agenda: stories that align with the interests of powerful stakeholders are prioritized, while those that might provoke backlash or do not promise immediate economic benefits are sidelined. This practice effectively limits reporters' capacity to pursue investigative journalism and cover issues of public interest comprehensively.

Respondant 6 Wasi Nadeem from Talon News said

“Kae bar aisa hua hy kay story approved hy sab theek hey, ichanak kahin sy baat ati hy aur khatam scene. Wo jee camera nae hy boss, bhai ap bta do krwani hey cover ya nae? Ye bhi nae btatay, hmen pta chal jata hy bs k story he kill krni hey”

It has happened many a times that an approved story is suddenly sidelined and resources are not being issued for coverage. Even we are not told that look this story cannot be done. Just resources are pulled back. Now we immediately understand that we are being denied of resources just to kill the story.

Respondent 4 said,

“Investigative journalism men time chiay hota hy, bari khabren bohat time mangti hen, Time bhi aik resource hey, kiun k channels ney apko time kay he pesay denay hen. Channels apko time bhi nae detay... aap apni beat men kuch story per kam krna chahtay ho us k liay apko sources sy milna hy information sy kahani bnani hy lekin ap ko kaha jaye ga, story hey? Ap kahyen gay k nae bna rha hu acha chal phir ja sabzi mandi sy beeper dey aa. Gaya ap ka sara time.. tau ye ban gae nokri 9-5 waali”

Investigative Journalism needs time. Big news stories require a lot of time. Time is also a resource here because Channels pay you against the time you surrender them. Channels do not allow you to spend that time as per your needs of work. Let's say you want to work on a story in your beat. For that you'll need to see your sources, extract information, weave a story, that would require time. But you will be asked(by the news room) Do you have any story (to readily on-air), you will answer that yes I am working on that, they will ask you then ok go to vegetable market and give a beeper from there. All of the time gone. That's how it becomes just another 9-5 job.

It is evident that by controlling access to necessary tools and equipment, media houses can dictate which stories can hit the bulletin and which not, thereby ensuring an ecosystem that yields the narratives aligned with their political and economic agendas.

This systematic resource restriction underscores the broader issue of editorial control and censorship, highlighting the profound challenges faced by journalists in a media landscape driven by politico-economic profit rather than the public good.

Reporters, constrained by limited resources, find themselves unable to cover stories that are unaffordable in terms of potential political or economic consequences for their organizations. This leads to a media environment where only certain narratives, those that serve the interests of the media owners and their affiliates, are broadcast. Consequently, critical public issues are often overlooked, depriving the audience of diverse viewpoints and in-depth investigations. This practice not only compromises journalistic integrity but also weakens public discourse, as the media fails to fulfill its role as a watchdog of democracy. The lack of comprehensive coverage and

investigative reporting ultimately erodes public trust and diminishes the media's ability to hold power structures accountable.

4.9 Impediments in Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism is essential for holding powerful entities accountable, yet reporters in Pakistan often face significant barriers in this regard. The empowerment of journalists to pursue and publish stories that scrutinize influential figures or institutions is severely restricted by the overarching control exerted by media owners and their affiliations (Nazir, 2024). Reporters frequently find themselves unable to investigate or report on issues that might expose wrongdoing or corruption among the elite, including political leaders, military officials, and major business figures (Riaz, 2021). Media outlets under private ownership often refrain from pursuing investigative pieces that do not serve the owner's priorities. Likewise, state-run media are dissuaded from investigative reporting if it opposes governmental interests (Rudin, 2002). Respondents testify the same situation in Pakistan. All of the respondents recorded their agreement over the structural impediments posed to them while conducting investigative reporting. Respondents, well recorded for their responses regarding resource allocation, discussed the structural problems that hinder them from pursuing newsworthy investigative stories.

Respondent 5, was clear about the situation as he noted that it is impossible to conduct Investigative journalism in a society where private entities hold a massive sway in information dissemination. Media ownership, concentrated in a few hands who have also the ownership of other businesses erodes the power of journalists to expose and educate the masses of the wrongdoings.

“Dekhen ab media aik private entity hey, un k owners kay apnay business hen, private business advertisers bhi hotay hen plus ap private jgha k andar nae ja sktay,, matlab k aik reporter ko jab access he nae hey, jab access nae hy tau kia reporting hoge”

Look, the media is now a private entity. Their owners have their own businesses, and there are private business advertisers as well. Plus, you can't enter private places. So, if a reporter doesn't have access, how will reporting happen?

Respondant 3 also discussed the situation in the channels as he said

“Channels ney bas 2, 3 log rkhai hotay hen investigative reporting k liay wo bhi investigative nae hoti bs bach bcha k hoti hy agenda hota hy dya hua pehlay sy.”

Channels only have 2 or 3 people for investigative reporting, and even that isn't real investigative reporting. It is done cautiously with a pre-set agenda. Masters save each other

Respondent 7, agrees to add some detail into it. He says

“Wasi Nadeem ‘Agar GNN Mian sb kay khilaf chlaye ga kuch tau Chatha sahib k khilaf bhi chal skti hen na cheezen”

If GNN runs stories against Mian sahib (referencing Mian Amir Mhemood owner of an education chain and media channel Dunya TV) things can be run against Chatha sahib (owner of Gourmet bakery chain in Pakistan and the owner of GNN TV channel).

Respondent 6 also agrees that this area is highly restricted, he laments

“Private Business hamara area of reporting hey he nae, udhr boss hmaray par jaltay hen {he giggles}”

Private business is not our area, we get our wings burnt there {uses a religious connotation laughingly}.

Respondent 4 explained that even public institutions have guarded themselves against media by cultivating a lucrative relational web, with owners, higher-ups and decision makers of the media entities. He terms the TV reporting as a fixed match for reporters.

“Sarkari idaray bhi ab patience nae rkhtay, unhon ny media kay khilaf safety mechanism bna liay hen ,, guard kr lia hey , safety guard. Unko pat hy k chanel k malikan kay dhanday kia hen aur unhen kia chaiay, so favours k sath aur kahin takat k sath media ko manage kr lia hey. Reporter k liay ab reporting aik fixed match reh gaya hy”

Government institutions also no longer have patience; they have created safety mechanisms against the media, the safety guards. They know what businesses the channel owners have and what they want. So, with favors and sometimes with power, they have managed the media. For a reporter, reporting has now become like a fixed match.

Analyzing the above responses, it's evident that private entities and corporations can significantly hinder the ability of private media to conduct investigative journalism on public interests through economic and legal pressures. Politico-economic considerations stemming out of ownership of Media houses is the key factor to discourage reporters to pursue investigative stories in Pakistani main stream media. These media outlets often rely heavily on advertising revenue from these corporations, creating a dependency that can deter them from pursuing stories that might jeopardize their financial relationships. Additionally, media organizations owned by large conglomerates may face conflicts of interest, where investigative reporting could harm the owners' broader business interests. Legal threats, such as defamation lawsuits, further intimidate journalists, discouraging them from investigating and exposing corporate malpractices. Corporations can use the threat of costly legal battles to silence media outlets, even when the stories are accurate. These combined pressures compromise the media's role in holding powerful entities accountable and serving the public interest, leading to a lack of critical investigative reporting on issues that affect society.

4.10 Reporter's position Vis a Vis Autonomy and Job Satisfaction

It is argued that in an editorially controlled and opaque media ecosystem, reporters often face immense pressure to conform to the agenda set by media owners or editorial boards. In media

organisations, reporters are officially made to function as marketing officers in addition to main reportorial duties (Oji, 2016).

This environment can lead to reporters becoming mere "yes men," echoing the viewpoints and narratives dictated by those in control, becoming gate watchers rather than serving as independent gatekeepers in any media organization (Bruns, 2003). The focus shifts from objective reporting to serving the interests of the media organization or its owners, turning reporters into mercenaries who prioritize personal gain or job security over journalistic ethics.

Furthermore, in such a system, transparency is often lacking, making it difficult for the public to discern the motivations behind the stories presented to them. Reporters may feel compelled to suppress information or distort facts to maintain favor with their superiors or to avoid repercussions (Hassan, 2011). This compromises their role as a conduit of information and can erode public trust in the media.

In this scenario, reporters can become defunct organs of the system, unable to fulfill their intended role as the Fourth Estate. The essence of journalism, which is to hold power accountable and inform the public, is lost, leading to a media landscape that serves the interests of a select few rather than the public good (Farooq, 2022).

Respondent Sabih Ul Hassan explains the role of the reporter in Pakistani electronic media echo-system in these words

"Hmaray Media men Reporter ka role bhai total hota hey yes sir, g sir, hukam sir, nothing else. Jo old guards hen reporting k matlab seniors un k liay ey change bohat shocking hey, wo yes sir ya yes men nae thay bosses kay."

In our Media role of a reporter is just to say yes sir ok sir as you order sir, nothing else. This is very shocking for the old guards, the senior reporters, they were not the yes men of the bosses.

The role of the reporter, traditionally seen as an independent spokesperson of public interest, is severely compromised under such a system. Reporters are often reduced to mere messengers who must align their stories with the interests of powerful entities, be it the military establishment, political figures, or influential advertisers. As respondent 1 Shahruxh Nadeem Laments

"Reporters ki kul okat aik qasid ki tarha hy pegham lana hy dena hy, chlay ga na nae chlay ga ye bhi us k control men nae hey"

The reporter's position in totally in our media is just of a messenger who has even no control over its on-airing.

Respondent 4, Zunaira Illyas explains the reporter's dissatisfaction as she notes

“Main ye soch kar ai the k as a reporter mera influence hoga, main logon k kaam aasku gee, I mean kisi ko zarurat ho to men unhen report kar kay un ko hal krwa du ge, lekin reality check mila k yahan to ap channel k higher up ki marzi k bgher kuch nae krsktay, aur marzi k ilawa agr channel us story men interested nae hey to bhi ap farigh he. Ye disappointing hey”

I came thinking that as a reporter, I would have influence, and I could help people. I mean, if someone needed help, I could report on it and get their issues resolved. But I got a reality check that here, you can't do anything without the approval of the channel's higher-ups, and even if they don't approve, if the channel isn't interested in the story, then you're out of luck. This is disappointing.

As evident from the discussion reveals a significant issue within the Pakistani electronic media ecosystem: the widespread dissatisfaction among reporters due to their lack of autonomy and the overwhelming influence of higher authorities and powerful entities. The traditional role of a reporter as an independent conveyor of public interest is severely compromised. Reporters are often reduced to mere messengers, forced to align their stories with the interests of powerful entities, whether they are military establishments, political figures, or influential advertisers. This subservience undermines the journalistic principle of independence and reduces reporters to conduits for pre-approved content, stripping them of their ability to investigate and report freely on matters of public significance.

This lack of autonomy leads to profound professional dissatisfaction among reporters. The initial aspirations of many journalists, who enter the field with the intent to influence and help society by shedding light on important issues, are crushed by the reality that they cannot act without the approval of their channel's higher-ups. Even if a story is of significant public interest, it will not be pursued if it does not align with the channel's interests or those of its influential stakeholders. This controlled environment stifles journalistic creativity and integrity, leaving reporters disillusioned and demotivated. The overall impact is a media landscape where the potential of journalism to act as a public watchdog and serve the community is severely compromised, resulting in a disempowered and dissatisfied workforce.

4.11 Ethical Dilemmas and Compromises in Journalism

Journalists in often face significant ethical dilemmas in such media ecosystems, one of which is the fabrication of stories or creating fake news and presenting them as truth (Voicepk.net, 2022). This involves creating false or misleading news content, whether by inventing events, quotes, or information or by manipulating facts to fit a specific narrative (Imam, 2015). The media fabricates news by disseminating false information divorced from reality, mimicking conventional formats to influence public beliefs and behaviors (Hassan et al., 2023). This includes the rapid spread of unvetted information on digital platforms, manipulation of public opinion through propaganda, and the weaponization of fake news by political entities to discredit critical news organizations and journalists become vehicles of these fake news (Kepplinger, 2021).

The media fabricates news for various reasons, including political agendas, economic gains, manipulation of public opinion, and undermining the credibility of rivals as fabricated news can serve as a tool for influencing elections, shaping narratives, and advancing specific interests or ideologies (Waisbord, 2018). The core ethical dilemma here is the tension between truth and deception. Journalists are expected to uphold the truth and maintain their integrity, yet the pressure to produce sensational stories that attract more readers or viewers can tempt them to fabricate stories.

Same is evident in Pakistani mainstream media as respondent 8 recognizes the fact that, it is now ingrained in the operational structure. She explains

”Asal bat ye hy k kahani kuch hoti hy channek ney usy apnay liay acceptable krnay k liay kuch aur spin dey dena hey, heran men is per hoti the shuru men jab spin shuda khabar ko hmaray malikan agay takatwaorn ko bhejtay thay k ye dekhien hm ney ye chlaya hy, jesy petrol jab Imran Khan ki Govt men barha to hmaray idaray ney isy Imran Khan ki naiki ginwaya k jitney ki summary aye the utnaa nae barhaya, jab k summery sy koi 2 rupay he kam tha”

The real issue is that the story is something else, but the channel spins it to make it acceptable for them. Initially, I was surprised when our bosses would send the spun news to their superiors, showing them what we aired. For example, when petrol prices increased during Imran Khan's government, our channels spun it to highlight Imran Khan's benevolence, saying the increase was less than the summary suggested, even though it was only 2 rupees less than the proposed amount.

Respondent 4 describes the situation in following words

“Main ny khud kae bar table stories file ki hen, table story ka aik concept hy jis marzi sy pooch lo, k reporter daftar men bethy bethy he assignment k kehlay per aik aisa news package file krta hy jo k sirf mafroozon per qaim hota hy us k peachy koi foot work nae hota, ye aam hey har channel men.”

I have personally filed several table stories. The concept of a table story is well-known in today's media eco-system, even you can ask anyone. It refers to a reporter sitting in the office and filing a news package on assignment that is based purely on assumptions, with no actual fieldwork behind it. This is common in every channel.

Respondent 5 gives the thesis in following words

“Ethics per amal krnay ki aik cost hy, us sy business profits maray jatay hen, is liay channels ethics ko downsize krtay hen aur har wo kam krtay hen jis sy mamla profitable rhay, khas kar jab election ka waqt ho tau bas phir political partyan khazanay baha rhi hoti hen channels ny un ko smetna hota hy, tab fabricated stories bhi chla di jati hen.”

There is a cost to adhering to ethics, which impacts business profits. That's why channels downsize ethics and do whatever it takes to keep things profitable, especially during election times when

political parties are pouring in money, and channels have to collect it. That's when fabricated stories are also aired.

Respondent 1 bifurcates the reporters into two categories and explains the situation in following verbatim

“Do tarah ke reporters hote hain. Ek tarah ke reporters woh hote hain jo siyasi partiyan ki khwahishat ke mutabiq khabrein nahi banate, bas khabar dete hain. Dusri tarah ke journalists woh hote hain jo khabrein ghadhte hain, khas tor par siyasi khabrein, taake channel ke faisla karnay walon aur siyasi malikon ke maqasid ko pura kar saken.”

There are two types of reporters one type is of the reporters who do not create news based on the wishes of the political parties, they just give news that's it. Other type is of the journalists who fabricates the news, especially political news to serve the motives of the channel decision makers and political masters.

4.12 Discussion

This study was conducted to get answers to the pressing questions regarding the functions of media in Pakistani society. It was pointed out in general observation and many journalists (Abbas, 2024), and various scholars (Kamboh, 2019) that the national media is not covering genuine public issues and is failing the public to have their voices heard in power corridors. The term profitable narratives was coined and operationalized by the study to describe the national media's priorities in daily news coverage. It is argued that these profitable narratives are prioritized by the media at the expense of issues of underprivileged citizens in the country. These are the stories, activities, statements, and narratives that give the channels the politico-economic clout. These often feature the members of socio-political elites as far as coverage of individuals is involved or intellectual descriptions of the issues that conform to the status-quo avoiding any meaningful criticism at the ruling class.

Three research questions were intended to know that is Pakistani electronic media structurally eliminating the space for genuine public issues by prioritizing profitable narratives, and is this shift reducing reporters to passive participants, limiting their ability to conduct independent journalism? This study has employed the qualitative method of in-depth interviews. Respondents with varying scales of experience were chosen to ensure the sample size was representative of the hierarchical differences in the industry. The interviews were grouped into seven main themes. Eight electronic media reporters took part in the study, sharing different views and experiences about how profitable narratives are often prioritized over important public issues.

These in-depth interviews of the prominent reporters of 8 A class channels reveal that the Pakistani media has been structured on elitist patterns. Journalistic organizations have now become power players in politics. Channels have become the weapons of political maneuvers where news is weaponized to gain socio-economic and political clout. As research question three was intended to know, It is obvious from the themes that emerged from the responses given by the respondents

that the way the whole news echo system has been structured, has annihilated the institution of the reporting. On the organizational level, a strict top-down approach and control over the news selection have transformed the role of reporters to just marketing agents of any company. Bulletins are devoid of coverage of issues related to day-to-day public interest. Issues that are important to common people, as they affect them in their daily lives, hardly become part of any bulletin because of their lackluster. For example, education, agriculture, health, sanitation, and other such issues seldom find any space in national airwaves. Instead, the meaningless day-to-day activities of the ruling class, in-fighting of the political elite, pomp and show of rich businessmen, cricket and showbiz stars can find space in the headline news.

As the research question about reporters' situation is poised, Findings reveal that Channels instruct their reporters with a list of dos and don'ts while covering their favorites. It is simple and easy for even an ordinary member of parliament or a provincial minister to manage the news coverage regarding them. This makes the reporters just marketing agents, who have been given the targets, and fulfilling them exactly is their task. Reporters revealed that the larger part of their duty time is spent on the coverage of activities of elite. The coverage includes their meetings, sense of fashion, and their concerns regarding well-being of a common man. Respondents had a view that the media has been structured in a way that serves as a tool to project the elite as pro-public. This service can't sustain a true reportage of the issues being dealt with by the common man. That is why the institution of the reporting has been rendered defunct as a structural policy measure. Although reporters come on the duty, ostensibly perform their reporting tasks but they are not assigned to report the information on genuine issues. It is structurally rooted out. This begets a repetition of elitist promotional content having no critical journalistic evaluation creating an echo chamber, where the same stories are repeated without proper critical analysis.

Another alarming revelation explains the role of reporters as mercenaries of the channels. They are assigned by the newsrooms the so-called exclusive stories that do not qualify to be news but propaganda, against the targeted entities or individuals. It has been reported that these stories are weaponized against certain individuals set targets by the owners cum management. Another concerning revelation was about the trend of fabrication of the stories. Reporters admitted the fact that because of a general sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness reporters find it easy to file table stories that comply with the policy instructions. Here respondents showed dissatisfaction towards their role in the news organizations and defined their position as comparable to a defunct genital. They pointed out that editorial decision-makers, as their nuanced tact to avoid coverage of the issues that do not fit the aspirations of management, restrict the access of equipment and logistics to the reporters for a particular story. They also assign them non-issues to cover thus letting the reporters face time shortages for investigations on their desired stories. This conscious, structural, and deliberate arrangement is used to ensure that the TV screens broadcast profitable narratives. Thus causing the exclusion of the narratives that are very critical to the public interest. It must be noted that the Pakistani media landscape has occasionally been termed as vibrant and supportive of democracy by different socio-political commentators (Nazir, 2024). That is why it

is generally believed that media is an entity that is serving the public cause. It was also believed that a functional public sphere is a bridge between the populace of the country and the ruling class. But the picture painted by the respondents challenges the notion of Pakistani media as a functional public sphere as the respondents react to it by declaring it a mirage. These revelations establish a wary picture of the Pakistani media landscape where bulletins running every hour are just hollow monuments of journalism.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the situation of journalism, reporting and news business that is void of the real spirit of public sphere. It explores the phenomenon of prioritization of elite centric content that is prioritized despite the low news value of that content over the coverage of critical public issues. Insights from interviews with reporters working in electronic media reveal how commercial and political pressures foster a culture of self-censorship, which in turn undermines journalistic integrity and narrows the diversity of perspectives in the media. This research also highlights the situation of institution of reporting in Pakistani media. Structural pursuit of profitable narratives diminishes the quality of reporting on key societal issues like health and education, and it weakens the media's essential role as a democratic watchdog. To combat these problems, it is crucial for media stakeholders to promote conditions that support independent journalism and prioritize reporting in the public interest. Further research should examine how these trends affect audience perceptions and the broader implications for democratic discourse in Pakistan, aiming to create a more informed and actively engaged public.

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