

# **DOMINANCE OF US OFFICIALS: A CASE STUDY OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF OSAMA BIN LADEN'S DEATH IN AMERICAN, BRITISH AND PAKISTANI MEDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This research paper examines the dominance of the US and Pakistani officials in the coverage of three prominent newspapers of the close allies of War on Terror – Pakistan, United States and United Kingdom while covering the death of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The three newspapers are The New York Times from the US; The Guardian from UK and Dawn from Pakistan. The contents of these newspapers have been studied for ten consecutive days starting from May 2, 2011 – the day bin Laden was killed in the US raid. The findings – based on the quantitative content analysis – show that the US officials dominated the coverage as compared to the Pakistani officials, and thus influenced the agenda of the coverage.*

**Keywords:** *Bin Laden's Death, Media Coverage, Dominance of US Officials, Agenda Setting, Journalistic Nationalism*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*"Osama Bin Laden's story did not end with his death – it continues to fascinate the world. As long as there are nagging questions and details that still do not add up, there is likely to be more speculations about who knew what and when about his life and his killing that compound (Corbin)".*

Osama bin Laden was shot dead by the US Navy Seals in an operation 'Neptune Spear', which left five dead and two injured. The dead included the bin Laden himself, his son Khalid, wife of one of the trusted couriers and two Al Kuwaiti brothers including Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, a trusted courier of bin Laden; who assisted him during his stay in Abbottabad and provided a cover to bin Laden (and his family) as a 'typical extended Pakistani family' (Gall, 2014). The raid lasted for 40 minutes approximately, in which no American was even injured in assault. Afterward, the dead body was flown to Afghanistan for official identification, and then buried at an undisclosed location in the Arabian Sea less than 24 hours of the episode (Staff, 2011). The 9/11 attacks that claimed lives of 2996 people, the US government increased the bounty on the head of Osama bin Laden to \$25 million, and declared him the 'Most Wanted Man' in the list of FBI's Most Wanted Men (FBI, 2010). He was the chief architect of the attacks and he claimed it himself in a video tape released by the Al Jazeera News (bin Laden, 2004).

The death of bin Laden provided the US a reason to celebrate, and set a platform to claim that 'Justice has been done'; but the operation was perceived very differently in Pakistan, where the media outlets, politicians and several opinion leaders started questioning the 'one-sided US operation' (considering it a violation of the sovereignty of Pakistan); expressing doubts about role played by the Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies in helping the US to conduct a successful operation; the failure of the Pakistan Air Force to trace the US helicopters, which reportedly flew from Jalalabad (Afghanistan); and the inability of the Pakistani forces to counter the US forces, which remained in Pakistan for almost 40 minutes. Such questions from different quarters visibly changed the tone of the high-ups in the government itself, who initially claimed bin Laden's death a 'big victory for Pakistan' and great achievement in the War on Terror (Gillani, 2011; Zardari, 2011). It turned to be a bad dream for the Pak army chief General Kiyani and his men, and therefore, they distanced themselves from it and took a nationalistic and patriotic stand on issue by calling it 'violation of sovereignty' (Gall, 2014).

The Pakistani government was left on its own and embarrassed by both US and its own people, while the US continued revealing new information related to the Abbottabad Operation or bin Laden's death or his life in the compound, almost every day. The Pakistani government imposed a ban on the live coverage of TV channels from Abbottabad about the incident, but it did nothing to stop the foreign media outlets like BBC, CNN and Aljazeera, and the US officials from questioning the (in) competence and credibility of the Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies in locating bin Laden and its role as a trusted frontline state ally. Distinguished publisher-journalist Victor Navasky (2002) has noted that 'post-9/11 journalism' took as a *donnee* that 'this was a time for rallying around the flag and that those who questioned national policy were giving aid and comfort to the enemy (Miller, 2012). Due to the state restrictions and military censorship, the mass media follows the state policy in reporting conflicts (Carruthers, 2000). "Media in Western countries deployed "two-sided message and double-blind communication" to create a deceptive appearance of their contribution to the de-escalation of the Gulf war. On the manipulation of "schematic" war images; and of Mral (2006) on the rhetoric's used by America and its allies to legalize their invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Raza, Jan, Sultan, & Aziz, 2012).The research questions answered in this research study are the following:

- Who is the actual source mentioned in the introduction of the news item?
- Who are the first three additional sources mentioned in the body of the story (without introduction)?

An effort to answer these questions will help us understand whom the newspapers were referring to in their coverage. The aim of this exercise is to show that how much the media outlets were looking at the US for information, and to compare the ratio of Pakistani

officials and the US officials in the introduction of the stories and also in the rest of the body (without introduction). It will show us whether or not the particular media outlet utilized local or international sources in their coverage. The American and Pakistani sources will be further categorized to know whether Pakistani officials or the US officials' voices were dominant in the coverage or not.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Thussu and Freedman (2003) stress that while reporting conflict situation, the mainstream media plays a vital role both as a 'publicist' and 'crucial observer'. Many other researchers including Magder (2003, p. 36) also testifies the claim that 'state actors' always play a crucial role, in the matters of foreign policy, to set and frame the 'news-agenda'. He claims that media coverage of foreign events is influenced by the interpretative frames offered by the 'political elites'. Once they (political elites) define the event in the context of 'national security' with some level of 'legitimacy', media outlets will also adopt the 'patriotic' tone on issue (ibid, 2003, p. 36). Herman and Chomsky also claim in their popular "Propaganda Model" that state actors have the ability to 'manufacture consent' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Reporting the conflict situation is not an easy job as it always brings challenges to the journalists. On one hand, they show reliance on political and military actors to cover the event but, on the other hand, they (political and military sources) also try "to cover up the truth and manipulate media reporting" (Nord and Strömbäck, 2003, p. 127). Indeed, the sources influence the tone of the coverage and leave an impression on the content of the coverage itself. Hamilton and Crimsky (cited in Mogensen, 2007, p. 306) are of the opinion that showing dependency on single source for seeking information would not result in balanced picture of the event.

The inclusion of different sources of information in a story for multiple views is indeed a good idea, but sometimes it is really challenging when it comes to practice – especially in a crisis situation. Different scholars studying the 9/11 attacks stated that American journalists often showed patriotism when they were reporting the 9/11 attacks (by relying mostly on US officials). Magder (2003, p. 36) also claims that after 9/11, 'intense patriotism' was visible in the coverage of American media. Although US government under Bush administration emphasized from day one that the War on Terror was not a war on Islam/Muslims; however, in real terms, administration supporters and others have increasingly defined it otherwise. The US media had adopted the tendency of US president's declaration that 'You are either with us, or against us', as an inherent frame for such coverage that has constructed a polarized world in which, those connected to Islam come under suspicion (Karim, 2006). It is because of this reason that today there exists a fundamental disconnect in communications between the US and Muslims around the world as each side sees the globe through a very different prism (Pintak, 2003).

Ahmad (2008) carried out a research on the US war in Iraq (March 1, 2003 to April 15, 2003) on how it was covered by the US and Canadian media. He studied the front pages of both *The Toronto Star* and the *New York Times* to understand the pattern of the coverage. He stresses that during the ‘foreign policy conflict’, media outlets mostly show dependency on the official sources to report it (ibid, 2008, p. 33). His findings also affirm that the *New York Times* was more ‘biased’ in its coverage of the War as the US sources mentioned in its coverage were 60.7% as compared to the 37.5% US sources (of its overall sources) cited in *Toronto Times*. He also stressed that difference in coverage of both the newspapers is also because Canada was not directly involved in the conflict; supported a diplomatic solution; and didn’t even agree with the U.S. to invade Iraq; and the Canadian media was not driven by patriotism (ibid, 2008). Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2008) also conducted research on the official time period of Iraq War (March 20 to May 1, 2003) in both American and Swedish media. They selected *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* from the US and *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* from Sweden. They all are widely accepted as the ‘elite’ newspapers of their countries (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2008, p. 208).

Now we will look at the coverage of War on Terror in Pakistan – which is considered one of the danger zones for reporting in the world – makes it difficult for the reporters to look independently into the issue (International Federation of Journalists, 2014). On one hand, the journalists are scared of the wrath of the Intelligence agencies and on the other hand, there are the violent Taliban. It is mostly difficult for the journalists to report the volatile issues like militancy and War on Terror in an independent way. In the past, several journalists have also remained on the hit list of Taliban for propagating progressive views and several others lost their lives in for reporting issues related to the war on terror, like Musa Khan Kheil, Saleem Shahzad and Hayat Ullah Wazir etc. Mukarram Khan Aatif – who worked for VOA (DEEWA Radio) is latest addition to list of slain journalists. Tahrir-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) a banned outfit of Pakistani Taliban – claimed responsibility for his murder and also issued warning to the journalists, complaining that they are not highlighting their point of view (BBC News, 2012a; Gall, 2014). The militants in Swat issued hit list containing names of few prominent journalists from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which forced the International Federation of Journalists and Reporters without Borders to write a letter to the President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari to take measures for the safety of the journalists (Government intervention sought for journalists’ safety, 2009).

In such circumstances, little space is left for journalists to keep things in black and white. Perhaps, it is the reason that most of the media outlets of Pakistan project the homogeneous picture of any conflicting issue by relying only on the military sources for their information or by sharing the ISPR’s (Pakistan Military’s Public Relations Wing) version about any such volatile event related to war on terror. It may be updates about the on-going operation

in different parts of the tribal areas of Pakistan or in past, the developments about such operation in the settled areas of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. One of the basic reasons for getting control over the news flow is that all the parties in the conflict are well aware of the repercussions of 'bad PR' (International Media Support, 2009, p. 27). On the other hand, Pakistani military, in the shadow of growing violence in the geo-political environment of the region, has also tried to use media to "better manage the national discourse around Pakistan's involvement in the international fight against terror" (ibid, 2009, p. 22). Perhaps, it is the reason that journalists could hardly explore the issue with a wide angle by contacting different legitimate sources—connected to story—who can contribute to issue by exploring full ground of events related to the War on Terror to the readers/ viewers, or even to have more balanced and legitimate opinion on the issue.

### **RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

This research study looks at the death coverage of bin Laden in the three broadsheet newspapers of the close allies of the War on Terror – US, UK and Pakistan. An effort has been made to select the best newspaper from each country. These three newspapers include: The New York Times from US; The Guardian from UK; and Dawn from Pakistan. Dawn is considered the widely circulated English (language) daily of Pakistan (Yousafzai and Rawan, 2009). The Dawn newspaper is one of the oldest English (language) dailies of Pakistan, which was founded by the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. It is considered the newspaper of professionals and teachers. It is also considered as an 'authoritative paper' (Singh, 2002), and also highly regarded for its best reporting and objective approach to the issues (Akhtar, 2000). It is termed as one of the liberal and professional newspapers of Pakistan. Likewise, Negrine (2008, p. 631) claims: "The Guardian can be accepted as the leading paper of the British left...". The only newspaper selected in the study from the US is the New York Times. It is considered the voice of the liberals. It is also included in the list of 'Premier newspapers in the US' and is also read by the nation's elite.

In order to have a better outcome and to place a valid opinion on the content of the coverage, it is important to select such a time period which is representative sample of the study (Berger, 2000, p. 182). As we are aware that killing of Osama bin Laden is a specific counterterrorism event, so the research study has been based on the specified sample of the newspapers – which ran for ten consecutive days, commencing from the day of bin Laden's death. This time period (ten days) will ensure the abundance of data available for the coverage. The data from the Guardian and Dawn were collected from 3 May 2011 to 12 May 2011; while the data from The New York Times were collected from 2 May 2011 to 11 May 2011. The differences in the dates are due to the time difference between US, UK and Pakistan and also due to the time of incident (bin Laden's execution) when it took

place. All the news stories and leaders (editorial) containing the phrase “Osama bin Laden” were studied in this research study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Among the research methodologies, the best methodology which can address all the outstanding research questions raised in this study is the ‘Quantitative Content Analysis’. It can help us to have more reliable data in order to place our opinion on the dominance of US or Pakistani officials in the coverage. Many researchers claim that “quantitative (content) analysis is (the) most efficient (method) when explicit hypotheses or research questions are posed” (Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998, p. 37). Many researchers also claim that content analysis only looks at the ‘manifest’ meaning of the text rather than the ‘latent’ meaning of the text (Berger, 2000, p. 117; Holsti, 1969). Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998, p. 30) claim that it only deals with manifest content and ‘makes no claims beyond that’. It is obvious from the research questions answered in the study that none of them has any inclination towards the latent meaning of the text and all of them look at the explicit meaning of the text, and that is why this researcher believes it the best methodology to answer these questions.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The research findings have been presented below in two sections. The first section discusses the sources mentioned in the introduction (or lead) of the different stories. The second section debates the utilization of first three additional sources mentioned in the rest of the body of the story (without introduction). Though, the sources have been classified in the different categories, the main focus will be on the US and Pakistani sources with special reference to its officials.

### **Source mentioned in introduction of news stories**

Source mentioned in the introduction of the news story actually gives us a clue about who the newspapers were referring to or attributing the information mentioned in the introduction/ lead/ start of the story. It will help us reach the original source from where the information originated. Although, it might not be mandatory to mention the source in the introduction but, still, if mentioned, it will give us a clue about the reliance of that media outlet on the particular sources for its coverage. The aim of this exercise is to know that how much the media outlets were looking at the US for information, and to compare the ratio of Pakistani officials and the US officials in the introduction of the stories.

From the table 4.1.1 below, it is clear that the Dawn showed almost equal reliance on both the US and Pakistani sources for its coverage in the introduction of the stories. It

means that most of the times, they were looking at both (US and Pakistani sources) for the information related to bin Laden's death or after.

The following conclusions can be derived from it:

- a) The Dawn utilized 12.5% of the US sources in the introduction of its coverage. But it is also important to note that 14 out of 24 US sources (mentioned in the Dawn) consist of the US media outlets; 4 consist of Ex-defense/ government officials of the USA; 2 consist of the US Defense Ministry/ Pentagon; 1 each consist of the US President, the US armed services official, the US Congress member and the White House Spokesperson. Out of 9 European Sources, 5 consist of Any Other Western media outlets.
- b) Pakistani sources made 13% of the coverage; and 12 out of the 25 Pakistani sources also consist of Press Releases/ Handouts and Press Notes issued to the Newspapers; 4 consist of local people; 3 consist of Armed/ Intelligence forces of Pakistan; while Pakistani President, ISPR (Armed Forces Information Wing), Pakistani Expert, Civil Society, Foreign Office of Pakistan and Opposition Political Party of Pakistan were quoted only once.
- c) It is also important to mention that 89% of The New York Times, 74% of the Guardian and 58% of the Dawn Newspaper news items did not carry any source (attribution to the information) in the introduction of their stories.

Table 1: Sources mentioned in the introduction

Source	Newspaper			Total
	Dawn	The Guardian	The New York Times	
<b>US Sources</b>	24 (12.5%)	7 (10%)	3 (3%)	34
<b>Pakistani Sources</b>	25 (13%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	26
<b>European Sources</b>	5 (3%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	7
<b>Rest of the World Sources</b>	7 (4%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	9
<b>Al-Qaeda/Taliban Sources</b>	2 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	3
<b>TV Channel/Newspaper</b>	16 (8%)	7 (10%)	6 (6%)	29
<b>Any Other</b>	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1
<b>No Source Mentioned</b>	111 (58%)	53 (75%)	94 (89%)	258
<b>Total</b>	191 (100%)	71 (100%)	105 (100%)	367

If we compare the US officials mentioned in the introduction of these media outlets with the Pakistani Officials, then the following results emerge, as shown in Table 4.1.2 below. The data show that US officials were slightly mentioned more in the coverage of Dawn and The New York Times. It must be noted that by the US officials I mean the US President, different Secretaries, Military Officials and other government officials etc. By

Pakistani officials, I mean the Pakistani President, the Prime Minister, Different Provincial and Federal Ministers, Lawmakers and Law enforcement agencies personnel etc.

Table 2: US and Pakistani officials

Newspaper	Source	
	US Officials	Pakistani Officials
<b>Dawn</b>	10	6
<b>The Guardian</b>	0	0
<b>The New York Times</b>	1	0

### Additional sources mentioned in body of story

In this research study, data were collected of the ‘first three sources’ mentioned in the body of the story. It will give us an idea about whether the particular media outlet utilized local or international sources in their coverage. The American and Pakistani sources will be further categorized to know whether the Pakistani officials or the US officials’ voices were dominant in the coverage. The way the data were coded can be found in appendix section of this paper. The results can be seen in Table. The Dawn cited 20% of US sources to tell the story of bin Laden’s death to the readers. Pakistani sources mentioned in the coverage were 29 per cent. The Guardian cited the US sources more in the coverage to tell the story of bin Laden’s death to its readers, as it made 31%. Pakistani Sources cited in their stories stood second with 25%. The New York Times also showed more dependency on its US sources as it made 44%, followed by the 22% of Pakistani sources. The findings show that the Western media outlets mostly looked at the Western sources (particularly US) than Pakistani sources to tell story of bin Laden’s death, and the Pakistani newspaper have looked a bit more at the Pakistani sources than the Western sources.

Table 3: Additional three sources mentioned in the body of the story

Source	Newspaper			Total
	Dawn	The Guardian	The New York Times	
<b>US Sources</b>	113 (20%)	66 (31%)	140 (44%)	319
<b>Pakistani Sources</b>	167 (29%)	54 (25%)	68 (22%)	289
<b>European Sources</b>	10 (2%)	15 (7%)	9 (3%)	34
<b>Rest of the World Sources</b>	25 (4%)	10 (5%)	25 (8%)	60
<b>Al-Qaeda/Taliban Sources</b>	11 (2%)	14 (6.5%)	11 (3%)	36
<b>TV Channel / Newspaper</b>	6 (1%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	8
<b>Any Other</b>	4 (1%)	2 (1%)	4 (1%)	10
<b>No Source Mentioned</b>	237 (41%)	51 (24%)	57 (18%)	345
<b>Total</b>	573 (100%)	213 (100%)	315 (100%)	1101

It will now be more important to look deeper into these Pakistani and US sources, and find out the officials mentioned on both sides in all these three newspapers. The comparative

data will help us understand who were more often mentioned in the stories for the information. It will also tell us how many Pakistani officials turned up on the issue. If we regroup the sources into three broad categories of the officials on both sides, then the results can be seen in the table 4.2.3. From results, it is now clear that the US officials dominated the coverage, in all the three newspapers as they were mostly cited in the body of the stories. If we combine all the three categories of the US and Pakistani sources in the Dawn, then it means that overall Pakistani officials cited in its ten days coverage are 93 and the US officials cited are 98. Besides these numeric differences and the dominance of the US officials in the coverage of the Dawn, there are a lot of other meaningful differences which need to be explored here, in order to better understand the nature of the coverage.

It was greatly expected from the top officials of Pakistan that they would turn up openly on the issue, will take a stand on it and will control the Public Opinion on the issue. But, they preferred to stay away from it as they would not have been able to answer the questions connected to the issue so expressively – like the presence of bin Laden in Abbottabad and failure of Pakistan’s Security/ Intelligence officials of Pakistan. It was the reason that every media outlet (studied in this research study) showed reliance on local people/ eyewitnesses from Pakistan to fill the gaps left by the Pakistani officials. It can easily be seen from the 32 local people/ eye witnesses cited in 167 Pakistani sources.

Table 4: Regrouping of Pakistani / US First Three Additional Sources

Source	Newspaper		
	Dawn	Guardian	New York Times
<b>Pakistani Government Officials</b>	33	11	8
<b>Police/Army/Security Officials of Pakistan</b>	24	8	15
<b>Pakistani Parliamentarian</b>	36	1	0
<b>US Government Officials</b>	76	40	89
<b>Armed/Security Officials of the US</b>	6	3	18
<b>US Parliamentarians</b>	16	5	13

If we look at the coverage of the Guardian, it shows the same trend of dominance of the US officials. It can better be understood from 20 Pakistani Official sources to the 48 US official sources. Out of 20 Pakistani officials, President was mentioned 3 times, and Prime Minister was mentioned 4 times; while the US President was mentioned 11 times. It means that the US top officials were more visible than the Pakistani top officials. They exploited the information in best possible way to achieve their political ends, while the Pakistani officials (possibly) did not know how to turn up on the issue to fit into the situation. They could not go against the anti-US sentiments prevailing among the people of Pakistan; neither could they challenge the narratives established by the US after the Abbottabad Operation, nor could they celebrate it to invite the wrath of Al Qaeda/ Taliban in Pakistan.

The (confused) official mindset left most of the people undecided on the issue. Perhaps, it was the reason that even the Guardian tried to fill the gap created by the Pakistani officials by giving more coverage to the local people/ eyewitnesses from Pakistan to tell the story as 25 out of 54 Pakistani Sources (cited in Guardian) consist of local people/ eyewitnesses.

This phenomenon of US dominance and the possible causes have been discussed by many other researchers including Daya Kishan Thussu as he too confirms that the US dominates the 'international flow of information and entertainment' (Thussu, 2000, p. 167). He further claims that during the time of conflict, even non-Western networks follow the news agendas set by the West; and the reason for the US dominance is its 'style of presentation', which aims to sustain the interest of the global audience (ibid, 2003, p. 127). McChesney (1997) also claims that a global media system is dominated by very few 'super-powerful' – but mostly by U.S.-based transnational media corporations. Other researchers also support this claim by saying that US has better 'information channels' along with its capacity to influence the 'global media' in particular ways (Nord and Strömbäck, 2003, p. 139). Nye (2004), while highlighting the dominance of the US- based media outlets, stressed that they mostly set the global media agenda through 'advertising and telecommunication networks', and in return it also helps the US to use its 'soft power' to pursue its 'national, economic and political interests'.

## **CONCLUSION**

Terrorism and political violence are basically acts of communication that are disseminated via media. The media as a political actor in its own right is capable of playing a number of roles i.e. agent of change, agent of stability and agent of restraint (Cole, 2012). This article attempted to show the dominance of the US and Pakistani officials in the coverage of the Dawn, The Guardian and The New York Times, while covering the death of Osama bin Laden. The findings revealed that both the Western media outlets – The Guardian and The New York Times showed generally more reliance on the US sources; while the Dawn almost equally utilized the US and Pakistani sources in the introduction of the stories. The data also reveal that in the rest of the body of the stories, Dawn utilized more Pakistani sources as compared to the US ones; while The Guardian and The New York Times relied heavily on the US sources. It was also found out in the data that the US officials dominated the coverage of all the three media outlets. The high visibility of the top American officials as compared to the top Pakistani officials shows that the American officials had more control over the information related to the operation or post-operation scenario, and they were also highly organized in their media and communication strategy.

The media in USA has been controlled by five companies that are mostly conglomerates for whom the tradition of journalism are incidental to their core businesses. The post 9/11 period has seen both continuity and change in the way the USA media and state have

combined to portray realities for their audience (Miller, 2012). Moreover, the less showing up of the Pakistani officials also leaves a question mark on their strategy in the War on Terror as a frontline state ally. Apparently, it shows that Pakistani officials could not turn up openly on the issue and nor could they criticize the US operation more openly as in either way they would have invited trouble. Perhaps, these gaps encouraged media outlets to utilize local sources from Pakistan such as 'eyewitnesses' and 'local people' more to tell the story of bin Laden's death to its readers. The abundance of the US officials in the coverage, of all the three newspapers, might have made the coverage biased in favor of the US, but it also gives the impression that the US was having more command over the story. Thus, it shows the dominant impression of the US officials on the content of the coverage besides setting the agenda of the coverage.

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