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RESEARCH PAPER

Effects of Political Polarization of Media on Contents Credibility and Consumers in Pakistan

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper investigates the relationship between political polarization of Pakistani TV news media and their contents' credibility among consumers. For this quantitative survey study, the data was collected from the youth of Lahore, mainly media students of six universities i.e. three each public and private sector through cluster sampling and employing the instrument of a purpose-built questionnaire comprising 20 items. Marshal McLuhan's (1964) work "Medium is the Message" provided theoretical basis of the study. That data was analysed through SPSS while tests of Cronbach alpha and beta test applied. The study results revealed that TV news channels political polarization affected the youth consumers significantly negatively (β= -0.449) while contents' credibility also affected negatively due to political polarization of channels (β= -0.180). This study recommends media channels, PEMRA and policy makers to ensure non-partisan political coverage to increase their contents credibility and viewership

Introduction

Societal and political polarization of media helps media consumers to be divided because of their political party affiliations. Sometimes economic conditions and race are also attached in the disagreement between media consumers after polarized news exposure. The polarized news consumption is the process leading towards political and social diversification and separation (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015).

Media atmosphere and political knowledge have a close relationship. Although media aid the consumers to become informatively rich citizens but from the last few decades, political knowledge of citizens is linked with decreasing and

incomplete supply of political awareness, diminishing news quality, less diversified news with high news channels meditation, variation and disproportion in political information and high disintegration and separated media (Aelst, et al, 2017).

Media has many effects on the cognition process of audiences and TV consumers. Sometimes, media cause audience to be aggressive and hostile about their ideologies. Hostile Media Effect (HME) is a phenomenon in mass communication that is about perception of media coverage as biased against their own pre-existing ideology. This perception comes from highly affiliated audiences (Matthews, 2013).

Media become partisan news are broadcast about any specific political party leading public to be more partisan-supported and politically polarised nation. One sided news representation may become the baseline for ideological political stance of citizens (Prior, 2013).

People have media perception in three parallel directions. First is about the level of trust and credibility; second about hostile media effects and the third regarding the focus on media perceptions, which are actually visualized by third person perception. Media perception effects' influence is enhanced when they are multiplied with effects of hostile media, especially the TV consumers, which are emotionally indulged in the issues, media are reporting (Tsfati & Cohen, 2012).

In the case of Pakistan, the sate-run Pakistan Television passed through mushroom growth after the year 2001 when first private television channel Geo News was launched. The development of media was being considered as an indicator towards well-informed nation, educated atmosphere and democratic environment in the country (Sarwar, 2014).

Geo News, being the premier private news channel remained a trend setterfor around one decade. In the regime of former president Asif Ali Zardari, Geo News took a firm stand against Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government. Resultantly PPP boycotted Geo News and supported other channels including Express News and Dunya News. Some other channels including Dawn News and Aaj TV remained comparatively neutral. Hence, there were three visible poles among media organisations including those against PPP, those in support of PPP and neutral ones (Daily Times, 2014).

During Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) sit-in in Islamabad and protest demonstrations in many cities of Pakistan the level of political bases polarization of media was very visible with ARY News, Express News and Sama TV taking sides with PTI while Geo News with Nawaz govt and Dunya, Dawn News remained comparatively less polarised.

Daily Times (2014) reports that majority of current affair programmes give extreme viewpoint or one-sided view of the picture and draw conclusion based on bias reporting. Detecting this biasness of the channels, many media consumers have

become active consumer and fact checkers to counter check the information presented on the same issue by different news channels. This is the starter of contents credibility cavity created by media houses. Moreover, many viewers are returned to print media. High rating craze and breaking news have totally spoiled the professionalism and ethical values of media.

Ali (2010) said the main reasons of polarization in Pakistan are fundamental changes in the society, where media liberalization, information technology and globalization have interconnected communities and civilizations. In Pakistan intense radicalization, socio-economic decline and explosive population growth has created polarized political opinions.

Literature Review

Barberá (2014) in "How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization: Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US" said mass political polarization is a signature phenomenon and it has received considerable scholarly and journalistic attention in recent years including the work of Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) and Fiorina and Abrams (2008). A growing body of work argues that the introduction of the Internet as a relevant communication tool is contributing to this trend (Farrell, 2012). Empirical evidence of persistent ideological sorting in online communication networks (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Conover et al., 2012; Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson, 2014) has been taken to suggest that Internet use may exacerbate mass political polarization. As Sunstein (2001) and Hindman (2008) argue, the Internet appears to create communities of like-minded individuals where cross ideological interactions and exposure to political diversity are rare. This argument builds upon a long tradition of research that shows that political discussion in homogenous communication networks reinforces individuals' existing attitudes (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Huckfeldt, 1995; Mutz, 2006)

Mitchell, et al (2014)in their study on 'Political Polarization & Media Habits' found that consistent conservatives of US were strongly clustered around a single news source, far more than any other group, with 47% citing Fox News as main news source about politics and the US government. They found that conservatives express greater distrust than trust of 24 of the 36 news sources included in their study. At the same time, fully 88% of consistent conservatives trust Fox News. The conservatives also express more trust than distrust of 28 of the 36 news outlets in the survey. NPR, PBS and the BBC were the most trusted news sources for consistent liberals.

Prior (2013) in "Media and Political Polarization" stated that in the 1970s, about a quarter of Americans identified strongly with a political party. Media in the broadcast era were probably too centrist for these people's tastes. Technological change has made it economically viable to cater to smaller audience segments. Most voters are centrist. Most voters avoid partisan media altogether or mix and match

across ideological lines. Those who follow partisan media closely and select mostly one side are already partisan.

Mediascholarsandpoliticalobserversworrythattheideologicalfragmentationoft hemediaenvironmentfacilitatedbycabletelevisionmayleadpeopletoincreasinglyinsula tethemselvesfromdivergentviewpointsandthuspolarizethemasspublicintodivergenti deologicalcamps.(Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason2010).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical support was taken from McLuhan's work 'medium is the message'. This is actually a phrase originally coined by Marshal McLuhan in his thesis 'Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man', published in 1964. He proposed in his theory that the focus of the study should be communication medium itself rather than the content or message it carries. He said medium affects society and nation by its content (Euchner & Jim, 2016). For McLuhan, the media control society's thoughts and ideologies. Media shape cognitive framework of audience as medium actually blinds viewers (McLuhan, 1964).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Following research questions and hypothesis guided the research direction proving the study roadmap:

RQ1. Whether there are any effects of political polarization of media on the credibility of media contents as visualised by the non-partisan youth in Lahore, Pakistan?

RQ2. How political polarization of media effected television watching habits of youth during 2020 in Lahore?

H1: The level of political polarization of a television channel is inversely proportional to its credibility among non-partisan youth consumers

H2: The political polarization of media negatively affected news television watching habits of non-partisan youth in Pakistan which resultantly increased their entertainment media viewership

Material and Methodos

Cluster sampling technique was applied on this research work. Population is divided into individual groups known as 'clusters'. Out of the population, simple random sample of clusters is taken aside. On the next stage, data analysis is compiled on the sampled clusters (Stat trek, 2020).

The researcher has taken Lahore universities as population. Clusters of six university students were selected from all the universities of Lahore. Later, responses were collected from three public sector and three private sector

universities each, from the mass communication students of University of the Punjab, University of Central Punjab, Queen Mary College, Lahore College for Women University, University of Management and Technology and University of Lahore, Forman Christian College C College University All the media students of Lahore universities were the population of this research work. Top six universities media students were selected as sample for this work (n=423). The study conducted through a quantitative survey method and a purpose-build questionnaire designed and pretested.

The collected data through survey was analysed in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Cronbach alpha, beta applied to check data reliability and correlation matrix formulated to observe the dependence of variables involved in the study.

Political Polarized Media

The term political polarization is conceptually defined as a process where people are ideologically divided according to their political affiliations or behaviours (DiMaggio, et al, 1996).

'Political polarized media' operational zed as media showing content in favour of a particular party or taking side of one political party. Four items were designed to measure the effect of polarized media on consumer and content credibility. Items were about news watching, current affair programs watching habits, watching favourite news channels, reason of one favourite channel and tendency of changing minds on any channels' content. Five point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' was used to measure respondents' responses. Cronbach Alpha test applied.

Contents Credibility

The term 'content credibility' operationalized as the content shown on the screens of people having no bias for any political party. The material that follows the ethical norms of news about neutrality of the media in any political issue. Three point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' was used to measure respondents' responses. Five items were selected to measure content credibility. These items were about; observation of angle of political talk shows' programs by noticing whether all the stakeholders' point of view included or not, noticing coverage of all political parties' issues, checking either negative, positive or both performances of political party are presented by the news channel or not, personal biasness of anchor about any specific political party in the current affair programs and coverage of the same news items every time differently by the news channels.

Television Consumers

The term 'TV consumers' was operationally defined as public who watch news channels for news bulletins, political talk shows and current affair programmes. Five items; including people watching TV for news bulletins and people watching TV for current affair programs were added in the questionnaire. TV consumers were asked about their party affiliation and their favourite new channel.

Items to measure the variables effect

Political Polarization Of Media	1. Your favorite news channel presents mostly good/positive things of your favorite political party.Your favorite news channel presents mostly bad things/negative points of your opponent political party.
	2. News channels do not give equal time to all political parties to present their stance in the talk shows.
	3. I am confused on the different angles, presented by the news channels, of the same political issue.
Content Credibility	1. News Channels takes the point of view of all the parties involved in the issue under discussion
	2. Your favorite news channel gives equal coverage to PML-N and PTI issues.
	3. I am confused on the different angles, presented by the news channels, of the same political issue.
Watching Habits of TV consumers	1. You watch those programs that are mostly in support of your political party.
	2. You watch those programs that are mostly against your opponent political party.
	3. You watch other than your favorite news channels to see the coverage of same issue on other channels.
	4. You switch over the channel when some program is showing personal bias of the anchor or channel.
	5. Any news channel content changed your existing mind about your political affiliation.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach Alpha

	N	Mean	SD	No of Items	Alpha
WH	423	3.67	.61	05	0.69
CC	423	2.73	.68	03	0.73
PP	423	3.19	.57	04	0.72

Table 1: To examine the reliability of the construct 'watching habits of TV consumers', 'content credibility' and 'political polarization of news channels', Cronbach Alpha test was applied. Total number of 423 media students responded to these three constructs. Five items were included to calculate watching habits of consumers, three items were included to calculate Content Credibility and four items were to find the political polarization of media. In the table value of α = 0.69 which exists in between 0.6 - 0.7, shows that reliability exists in watching Habits of consumers. Similarly, Content Credibility and political polarization's alpha value (α>0.6 and = 0.73) shows the internal consistency level in these two constructs.

Table 2
Correlations Matrix

	1	2
1. WH	--	
2. CC	.222**	--
3. PP	-.423**	-.147**

Correlations matrix: this table is about coefficients of correlation in the variables studied in this research work. In the table, every cell expresses the correlation between two variables. Value .222**, -.423** and -.147** shows highly significant relationship between variables. Value .222** shows that content credibility and watching habits were having highly positive significance, which means that media with content credibility has good relationship with increase in watching habits of consumers Co-efficient of correlation -0.423** represents political polarization with watching habits of consumers, a negative significance. Similarly, coefficient of correlation -.147** shows a negative correlation between watching habits and political polarization.

Table 3
Path values

Path	B	T	P	R^2
PP->CC	-0.180	-3.060	0.002	0.03
PP->WH	-0.449	-9.585	0.000	0.179
CC >WH	0.196	4.661	0.000	0.05

Table 3: PP->CC means political polarization (independent variable) affected negatively on content credibility which was actually negative dependence (b=-0.180).R square value in the table shows that with the increase in PP, 0.03% CC was also changed. PP->WH means political polarizations' negative dependence on watching habits (b=0.449). With the high PP, 0.179% watching habits are negatively changed. CC >WH means content credibility (independent variable) and watching habits (dependant variable) have positive dependence on each other (b=0.196). With the presence of content credibility watching habits were also increased positively by R2=0.05%.
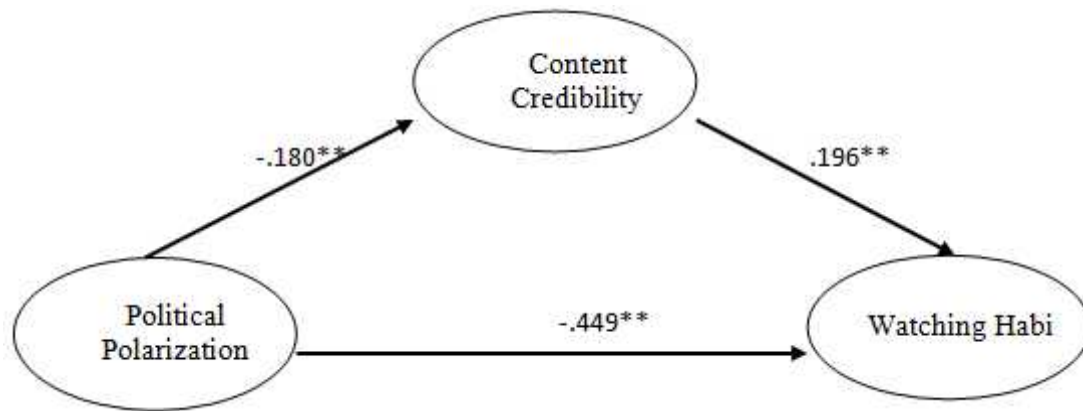
Fig.1: This figure explains the relationship between political polarization, watching habits and content credibility of media.

The model elaborates three major effects: one was on content credibility of the media and second was on the watching habits of consumers and third was the relationship between content credibility and watching habits of the consumers. In first case, political polarization was the independent variable affected negatively the watching habits of consumers. With a highly polarized media, decreasingly trend of watching habits of audiences were observed with b=-.449**. In the second, political polarization affected negatively the content credibility of media in the views of audiences. With political polarized media the content credibility was damaged as b= -.180**. Third, the correlation between content credibility and watching habits was seen positive. People watched more and became politically well informed when content was credible and media was freely working without any political polarization as b=0.196** which showed a strong positive dependence of these two variables.

Conclusion

This study finds a strong relationship between political polarisation, TV watching habits of consumers and content credibility as perceived by the TV news channels consumers.

H1: The level of political polarization of a television channel is inversely proportional to its credibility among non-partisan consumers. The study findings supported the hypothesis (H1) as due to high level of polarised media; the content credibility among consumers was negatively affected. Where the media was politically biased and giving one-sided coverage about any political agenda, the content credibility among TV consumers were decreased. With every 1% increase in political polarization the content credibility in the perception of viewers decreased by 0.180% which indicates the inverse relationship with politically polarized media and content credibility.

H2: The political polarization of media is negatively affecting the television watching habits of people in Pakistan. This hypothesis was also supported by the study results reflecting negative dependence between political polarised media and TV watching habits of consumers. In addition, the study revealed that consumers' watching habits were decreased by 0.449% when media was exposed as politically biased and partisan. It seemed that consumers on the different types of political reporting on the same issue. Consumers were fed with biasness, polarisation and division of media in the case of different political parties' coverage and ultimately they switch off the channels when they feel that news channels are reporting unfair. Furthermore, content credibility influenced positively the TV channels' viewership to be more informatively rich in politics. With the credible content, 0.196% increasing trend in watching habits of people was seen.

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