

Dominance of US Officials in the Pakistani TV Channels: A Case Study of the Media Coverage of Osama Bin Laden's Death¹

Amir Hamza Marwan

Faizullah Jan

&

Altaf Ullah Khan

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication

University of Peshawar

Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

This research paper attempts to show the dominance of US officials in the Pakistani TV channels through the coverage of the death of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The three TV channels selected in this research study include the private broadcasters—*Geo News* and *Dunya News*; and public broadcaster, Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV). Starting from the killing of Bin Laden on 2 May 2011, we study the coverage of the three TV channels for ten consecutive days. The findings—based on the Quantitative Content Analysis—show that US officials dominated the coverage in the *Geo News* and *Dunya News* while the Pakistani officials dominated the coverage in Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV). The dominance of US officials in the coverage also shows their control over the content besides setting the agenda of the coverage.

Keywords: Bin Laden's Death Coverage; Pakistani TV Channels; Dominance of US Officials; Agenda Setting

Introduction

Osama Bin Laden was killed by the US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 2, 2011. The killing of Osama Bin Laden was a big surprise for the entire world including the people of Pakistan. The official confirmation of his death came from the US officials in the morning PST. The killing provided a platform to the American people to celebrate it on the streets and in front of the White House that 'justice has been done,' but the event was perceived very differently in Pakistan. The media outlets in initial broadcast (before the official confirmation of the US) informed its audience that Pakistani military chopper has crashed near the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA), Kakul, due to some technical fault. It was later when they started debating the death of Bin Laden in the garrison town, Abbottabad.

It was hard for many to believe that Bin Laden lived so lavishly for more than five years in a villa at a stone throw from the PMA. Initially, it was welcomed by Pakistan by calling it a big victory in the ongoing 'War on Terror.' Soon the officials found themselves in hot water after opposition from the military. The official stand changed

overnight, and Abbottabad Operation was considered ‘One-sided US Operation’ and some called it ‘attack on its sovereignty and integrity’ (Gillani, 2011; Bashir, 2011). In such a situation, it is important to look at the strength of the Pakistani and US officials cited in the coverage of Pakistani TV channels as it will help us understand who were prominent in the coverage. The findings will also show the dominance of officials over the content besides leaving the impression of influencing the coverage in their way.

The research questions answered in this research study are as follows:

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

The findings of this research study will reveal sources on which the TV channels showed dependency for their coverage i.e. local or international besides showing the visibility and dominance of the US and Pakistani officials after the killing of Bin Laden. The strength of sources will determine who was in control of the coverage of Bin Laden’s killing on Pakistani TV channels.

Literature Review

Thussu and Freedman (2003) claim that mainstream media carries huge importance while reporting any conflict situation. They stress that journalists, in such a situation, should look at the events independently and impartially as then they would be able to challenge the powerful narratives of the government and establishment. Other researchers including Magder (2003) also stress that ‘state actors’ have the ability to set and frame the ‘news agenda’.

Conflict reporting is always challenging. On the one hand, the journalists show dependency on the government officials for the information, but then they (political and military actors) also try to hide the ‘truth’ and ‘manipulate the media reporting’ (Nord & Strömbäck, 2003). Such practices indeed undermine the investigative reporting of any such issues.

Indeed, sources have the capacity to influence the tone and content of the coverage. Many scholars including Hamilton and Crimsky (cited in Mogensen, 2007) believe that showing reliance on single source for information will not result in the balanced picture. It is always considered good to contact the different sources, while reporting any conflict, to explore the issue from the different angles.

Thussu and Freedman (2003) also stress that ‘Truth’ is an important commodity in the era of 24/7. They stress that reporters should go beyond the official version, issued in the form of handouts and press releases, to explore the ‘original’ story. McChesney

(2002) claims that when journalists rely only on the official sources for information, they start acting as ‘stenographers’ for those.

Nord and Strömbäck (2003) looked at the coverage of 9/11 attacks and the (early phase) of attacks of the US in Afghanistan in seven Swedish media outlets. They came up with the following conclusions:

- a) ‘American elite sources’ outnumbered the ‘Swedish elite forces’ in the coverage of both the 9/11 attacks and early phase of War on Terror.
- b) The Afghan sources were cited less than both the American and Swedish sources as they were less accessible.
- c) The Swedish journalists showed reliance on the American media and their reporting for their coverage.

The research study above shows that US mostly dominates the coverage of world events. Scholars mention different reasons for it. Thussu (2000:167) is of the opinion that US dominance is due to its ‘style of presentation’, which sustains the interest of global audience. Nord and Strömbäck (2003:139) also claim that US has better ‘information channels’, having the capacity, to influence the ‘global media’ in the desired direction. There are many other scholars who support this view by claiming that one-way flow of information in the world is due to the ‘dominant political and economic structures, which tend to maintain and reinforce the dependence of poorer nations on the richer’ (MacBride et al., 1980). Akbar (2009) claims that developing countries lack resources, powerful telecommunication system, trained and qualified journalists and good literacy rate, which makes them dependent on the Western media outlets. Thussu (2007) also claims that another advantage of the powerful the US media is that it is available in many forms; he says: ‘if not in English then in dubbed or indigenized versions.’

Research Framework

This research study is based on the media coverage of three TV channels of Pakistan. It includes two private broadcasters, *Geo News* and *Dunya News*, and the state owned, Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV). It is important to look at the coverage of these three TV channels as it helps us understand the similarities and differences in the public and private broadcast besides showing the differences between the private TV channels.

Geo News is considered by many researchers as one of the ‘popular’ private TV channels in Pakistan which enjoys high viewership, partly due to its availability on smartphones, internet and cable. *Geo News*’ anti-establishment stance worked for it, especially after the suspension of its license; closing of its transmission; and issues with cable association. On the other hand, *Dunya News*, with its headquarter in Lahore, is also a popular TV channel of Pakistan. Its stand on issues differs from that of the *Geo News*. It is known for its center-right policy but many still consider its

coverage unbiased. Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) also enjoys high viewership and has more outreach than other Pakistani TV channels due to its terrestrial setup. But still it is criticized by many for acting as a ‘mouthpiece’ of the government as it gives the government extensive coverage (*Dawn, 2014*). Its 9 o’clock night News Bulletin, *Khabarnama*, is often mocked by many as the news about ministers. To ensure the better findings, the news bulletins of these TV channels have been studied from May 2, 2011 to May 11, 2011. The two main bulletins of 3 o’clock in the afternoon and 9 o’clock at night of each TV channel were studied every day. Every news story containing the phrase ‘Osama Bin Laden’ was selected, studied and coded. The data of the three channels was collected from their respective head offices, but only the scripts of the on aired news stories could be ensured. The missing bulletins of *PTV News* are the following:

1. May 6, 2011 – 9 o’clock bulletin;
2. May 7, 2011 – 3 o’clock bulletin

216 news stories of *Geo News*; 184 of *Dunya News*; and 63 of *PTV News* were studied which account for the total 463 news stories.

Research Methodology

This research study was based on the ‘Quantitative Content Analysis’ that stresses on ‘identifying and counting the occurrences of the specified characteristics’ [in the text] (Hansen, 1998). Though, many researchers claim that ‘Quantitative Content Analysis’ has only the ability to look at the ‘manifest’ meaning of the text rather than a ‘latent,’ but still it is considered by many as the best methodology ((Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998; Berger, 2000; Holsti, 1969). Hansen (1998:98) strongly agrees that in contrast to many other interpretive and qualitative approaches, content analysis is more open to scrutiny. Berger (2000) further argues that it is the best methodology when comparative content analysis is applied in the research. Our research questions are linked to the manifest meaning of the text and are answered systematically by coding the different values in the coding sheet. It should be noted that initially the data was collected via coding sheet by specifying 78 different sources both in the introduction and the rest of the body of the story, which were later broadly squeezed into 7 and 8 sources respectively.

Findings

The findings of this research study are presented in two sections: the first deals with the sources mentioned in the introduction of the stories, the other with the sources mentioned in the body of the story. The sources have been classified into different categories, but the focus is on the US and Pakistani sources with special reference to its officials.

Main Source of the Introduction of the News Story

Source mentioned in the introduction of the TV News will give us a hint as to whom the TV channels in Pakistan were referring to about the information they give in the

lead of the story. Although, it is also not a mandatory practice that TV Channels should mention the source of information in their introduction or the lead of the story, but if it is mentioned then it will give us a data. This data will enable us to determine as to who became the basis of the report aired by the TV channels. The basic reason for looking at the source in the introduction of the story is to know how much the TV channels were looking at the US and Pakistan for the information and then to compare the ratio of Pakistani officials and US officials later. Table 1 below shows that all the three TV Channels of Pakistan have mentioned US sources more than the Pakistani sources to tell the story of the death of Bin Laden/Abbottabad Operation. If we look at the data below, it shows that:

a) *Geo News* referred to most US sources for the information they presented than Pakistani sources as it stood 18%. It is also important to note that out of the 40 US sources, 27 consist of the US media; 4 White House Spokesperson; 3 US officials; 2 US President; and 1 each of US Defense Secretary, US State Department, FBI website, and the Pentagon.

b) Pakistani sources mentioned in the introduction of the stories on *Geo News*, made only 9% which is half of the US sources. Out of the 19 Pakistani sources, 3 each consists of the Prime Minister House Spokesperson and Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson; 2 each consists of Armed/Intelligence Forces and Pakistani experts, while 1 each consists of ISPR, eyewitnesses/local people, Pakistan Air Force officials, opposition parties of Pakistan and Provincial Chief Minister.

Table 1
Main Source of the intro of News Story

	US Sources	Pakistani Sources	European Sources	Rest of the World sources	Al-Qaeda/Taliban	TV channel sources	No Source	Total
<i>Geo News</i>	40 18%	19 9%	4 2%	12 5%	2 1%	64 30%	75 35%	216 100%
<i>Dunya News</i>	22 12%	8 4%	3 1.5%	2 1%	1 0.5%	60 33%	88 48%	184 100%
<i>PTV News</i>	11 17%	4 6%	2 3%	2 3%	0 0%	7 11%	37 59%	63 100%
Total	73	31	9	16	3	131	200	463

The above findings show that *Geo News* was more reliant on the US sources, especially the US media, as compared to the Pakistani sources to tell the story of Bin Laden's death. That *Geo News* based the introduction of on the US sources shows, up to some extent, that the US held the most important information and controlled the

content of the coverage. The same trend can also be seen in the coverage of the rest of the TV channels.

c) The *Dunya News*, in its coverage, also referred to more US sources as compared to Pakistani sources for the information they mentioned in the introduction of the stories, as it made 12% and 4% respectively. If we re-categorize the US sources, 21 of the 22 consist of the US Media and only one consists of US Defense Secretary. On the other hand, out of the 08 Pakistani sources, 3 were eyewitnesses/local people, 2 each consist of Pakistani experts and Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson, while the ISPR was mentioned only once. The *Dunya News* was relatively more reliant on the US sources than the Pakistani sources. It also shows that US sources shared the most important information, which provided a base for their stories and coverage.

d) The state owned *PTV News* also relied on the US sources more than the Pakistani sources for the information in the introduction of the stories with 17% compared to 6% Pakistani sources. Out of the 11 US sources, 6 consist of the US media while 2 each consist of the White House Spokesperson and the US officials. On the other hand, out of 4 Pakistani sources, 3 were of Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson, and one consists of Interior Ministry of Pakistan. Again, it shows that even the official broadcaster of Pakistan *PTV News* was looking at the US for information than Pakistani sources.

The US sources for the information in the introductions of all the stories stand at almost 16%, while the references made to Pakistani sources stand only at 7%. It must be noted that out of these 73 US sources mentioned in the introduction of the news stories of all the TV Channels, 54 are of the US media which shows that Pakistani TV channels referred more to the US media than the US officials. The Pakistani sources made only 6% of the entire coverage. It should be noted that 44 percent of the stories did not carry any reference to the source at all. The data above shows that there was some level of dominance of the US sources in general and US media in particular over Pakistani networks in the coverage. If we focus only on the US and Pakistani officials in the coverage, then the data shows that the US officials were referred slightly more in the coverage than Pakistani officials, except in the *Dunya News*. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
US and Pakistani officials in the coverage

Name of a TV Channel	Pakistani Officials	US Officials
<i>Geo News</i>	11	13
<i>Dunya News</i>	3	1
<i>PTV News</i>	4	5
Total	18	19

Additional Sources Mentioned in the Body of the Story

Now we turn to the sources used in the body of the stories. The data of the first three additional sources show how a media outlet utilized Pakistani sources or US sources to tell the story of Bin Laden’s death/ Abbottabad Operation to its audience. At the end, the American and Pakistani sources are re-categorized to learn whether Pakistani or US officials were dominant in the coverage.

Table 3 below shows that Pakistani sources were mentioned more in the coverage than the US sources in the stories of all the three TV channels. Interestingly, the introductions of the story make more use of US sources than that of Pakistani ones. That means the TV channels started the news by referring to the US sources for the information they mentioned, but later they tell their own story by citing the local sources. If we look at the coverage of the Geo News, it shows that Pakistani sources mentioned were 14%; while the US sources mentioned in the coverage were 10%. The coverage of the Dunya News also shows the same trend as Pakistani sources dominated the coverage as it made 22%; while the US sources mentioned in the coverage were 15%. The official broadcaster–*PTV News*–also cited more Pakistani sources than the US sources which are evident from the figures of 16% as compared to 9%.

Table 3
Additional Three Sources Mentioned in the Body of the Story

Name of TV Channel	US Sources	Pakistani Sources	European Sources	Rest of the World sources	Al-Qaeda/Taliban	TV Channel/	Any Other	No. Source	Total
<i>Geo News</i>	63 10%	91 14%	3 0.5%	9 1%	3 0.5%	4 0.5%	5 1%	470 72.5%	648 100%
<i>Dunya News</i>	81 15%	120 22%	6 1%	8 1%	4 0.5%	3 0.5%	4 0.5%	326 59%	552 100%
<i>PTV News</i>	18 9%	30 16%	0 0%	12 6%	0 0%	0 0%	5 3%	124 66%	189 100%
Total	162	241	9	29	7	7	14	920	1389

Besides showing the reliance of Pakistani TV channels on both Pakistani and the US sources in the coverage, it also shows the dominance of these both on the coverage. Beside this, Table 3 also shows less citation of Al Qaeda/ Taliban sources in the coverage which clearly indicates that after the death of Bin Laden/ Abbottabad Operation, the real story was between the US and Pakistan as both the Al Qaeda and Taliban were out of the scene after the incident.

It is now important to look deeper into the data of Pakistani and US sources to explore who were actually mentioned in these sources across the three TV channels. This

comparative analysis will help us understand that to whom the TV channels were mostly looking while giving information to its audience. It will also help us know that how much the Pakistani officials were visible in the coverage along with the US officials. If these two categories are re-categorized, the holistic picture about the citation of the US and Pakistani officials can be seen in Table 4 below.

If we look at the results in Table 4, it shows that the US officials were dominant in the coverage of both the *Geo News* and the *Dunya News*, but Pakistani officials were dominant in the *PTV News*. If we combine all the three categories of the US and Pakistani officials in all the TV channels, then the results are as follows.

a) In *Geo News*, the overall Pakistani officials mentioned in the entire ten days of the coverage (20 news bulletins) is 39; while the US officials mentioned in the ten days coverage are 52.

b) In the *Dunya News*, Pakistani officials mentioned during ten days of the coverage are 62; while the US officials mentioned in the ten days coverage are 68. It shows that the *Dunya News* utilized both Pakistani and US sources more than the *Geo News* to tell the story of Bin Laden's death/ Abbottabad Operation. It also shows that the *Dunya News* was less dependent on the US sources as compared to the *Geo News* (though US sources dominated both).

c) In *PTV News*, the Pakistani officials, cited altogether were 27; while the US officials were 18.

These results apparently show that, mostly, the US officials were controlling the information related to the death of Osama Bin Laden or the Abbottabad Operation – especially in the coverage of private TV channels–than Pakistani officials (whom one would have expected to dominate being the host of the event). It is now important to go a bit deeper into these numerical values as there are certain other differences that need to be explored to understand the coverage, of these private and public broadcasters, in a better way:

a) In the *Geo News*, the Pakistani President was not mentioned at all during the entire coverage; while the US President was mentioned 8 times. The Pakistani Prime Minister was mentioned only 6 times. It means that the US President was mentioned more than both the Prime Minister and President of Pakistan.

On the other hand, *Dunya News* cited the Pakistani Prime Minister and President more than the *Geo News*. The Pakistani Prime Minister was mentioned 14 times; the Pakistani President was mentioned 3 times; while the US President was mentioned only 4 times. It shows that the *Geo News* looked more at the top US officials for the coverage than Pakistani officials. Indeed, the Pakistani officials were not that much visible in the coverage, but still, they were not completely out of the scene (as we can see it in the data of *Dunya News*). The results of *PTV News* tilted more towards the *Dunya News*—where the US President was mentioned 8 times; Pakistani President was

cited 2 times; while the Pakistani Prime Minister was cited 13 times. It means that both *Dunya News* and *PTV News* tried to use more local ‘top’ official sources than the *Geo News* to tell the story of Bin Laden’s death/ Abbottabad Operation.

b) The *Geo News*, on the other hand, showed less dependency on the White House Spokesperson for the news as he was cited only once; while the Foreign Office of Pakistan was mentioned 7 times. The *Dunya News* showed bit more reliance on both the White House Spokesperson and Pakistan’s Foreign Office as they were mentioned 7 times and 9 times respectively. *PTV News* did not mention the Whitehouse Spokesperson in its entire coverage; but they cited Pakistani Foreign Office 2 times.

From the data and discussion above, in Tables 3 and 4, it is clear that both Pakistan’s private TV channels and public broadcaster (*PTV News*) utilized more Pakistani sources than the US sources in the body of the story; but it also shows that the US officials dominated the coverage of the *Geo News* and the *Dunya News*. *Geo News* showed more reliance on the US officials as compared to the *Dunya News* which have tried to balance both. The *Dunya News* utilized more sources than the *Geo News* to tell the story of Bin Laden’s death as well. Indeed, the visibility of Pakistani officials was an issue (as no one was coming on front to own the operation or to take the public in confidence), but one would have expected the *Geo News* that they should have followed the Pakistani officials more as the *Dunya News* did in Pakistan. On the other hand, *PTV News*, as one would expect from the officially controlled media, was more inclined to Pakistani officials than the US officials.

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

TV Channels	Pakistani Govt. Official	Police/Army/Security Officials of Pakistan	Pakistani Parliamentarian	US Govt. Officials	Armed/Security officials of US	US Politicians
<i>Geo News</i>	27	9	3	33	11	8
<i>Dunya News</i>	46	11	5	63	4	1
<i>PTV News</i>	27	0	0	17	1	0

Conclusion

This article examined the US and Pakistani sources mentioned in the introduction and body of the stories in the coverage of *Geo News*, *Dunya News* and *PTV News* – while covering the death of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The findings showed that all the three TV channels of Pakistan (both public and private broadcasters) showed more reliance on US sources than Pakistani ones, in the introduction of their stories, while covering the issue. It also showed that they were more reliant on the US

media for their coverage – besides the US officials. It shows the command of US officials over the information–related to Bin Laden’s killing and Abbottabad Operation. The dominance of US officials in the introduction also shows that they twisted the agenda of the coverage in their own way, even on Pakistani TV channels, by sharing those detail which served their interest.

The findings, based on the three additional sources mentioned in the body of the story, also show that Pakistani sources were cited more in the coverage of all the three TV channels than the US ones. It gives the impression that US sources provide a base for their stories, but then they tried to build up their own story on it. The further segregation of this data shows that US officials dominated the coverage in the private TV channels of Pakistan – *Geo News* and *Dunya News*–than the official broadcaster – *PTV News*. It also shows that *Geo News* looked more at the top US officials than the Pakistani ones; while *Dunya News* looked more at the top Pakistani officials than the US ones. Indeed, the visibility of Pakistani officials, after the Abbottabad Operation, was an issue, but still the data of *Geo News* shows that (perhaps) the top Pakistani officials were not considered newsworthy. It is also not surprising to see the dominance of Pakistani officials in the coverage of *PTV News*.

The findings give the impression that though the event took place in Pakistan, but it was controlled and unfolded by US. US officials stayed very meticulous by chalking out a media strategy which helped them to dominate even the private Pakistani screens, and even setting their agenda of the coverage. On the other hand, it also exposes the poor media strategy of the Pakistani officials – who were not even clear of their own stand on Bin Laden’s killing as they were blowing both hot and cold. Perhaps, it was hard for them to annoy both US and Taliban. TV channel is considered an important medium of communication and serves a good platform for any government in the time of crisis to control the public opinion–but (perhaps) it was not properly utilized by the Pakistani government, and thus it provided an opportunity to US fill the space and set the agenda of the coverage.

Notes

¹This is a revised and altered version of my unpublished PhD work I submitted to the University of Sheffield. I completed my work under the supervision of Ralph Negrine.

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