

Operation Zarb-e-Azb: An Analysis of Media Coverage

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Abstract

The role of media in covering terrorism related incidents has generated quite a debate throughout the world. Pakistan, with its independent news media, is also facing this problem since the country is engulfed in the flames of terrorism. Pakistan has launched a much awaited Operation Zarb-e-Azb since June 2014. The focus of this paper is on portrayal of this operation in the mainstream print media of Pakistan. The study argues that the reporting of the operation was counterproductive to the stated policy of the government regarding counter-terrorism. It deviates from the boundaries set forth by the Constitution of Pakistan, and in the process creating an enabling environment for the propaganda of terrorists.

Keywords: Operation Zarb-e-Azb, Counter-terrorism, Print Media, Taliban, Global War on Terror.

Introduction

The tragedy of 9/11 transformed security policies and changed geopolitical calculations of not only the United States (US) but also Pakistan. In response to the US demand of, “You are with Us or against Us”, Pakistan aligned itself with the US in Global War on Terror (GWOt). The former President Pervez Musharraf expressed this decision as: “Pakistan took a strategic decision, based on the principles of humanity and its national interest to support the GWOt”. Resultantly, Pakistan received about US\$11 billion from the US for the logistical support. This amount was provided for the counter-terrorism operations mainly in Waziristan and other tribal areas along the Durand line (Pak-

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Afghan border).¹ In reaction to this policy, Pakistan became stage of war and militants based in tribal areas turned their guns against the state of Pakistan.

Media seems to be a major player in national and international arena contending and competing for authority. Pakistan has been the subject of headlines in global media for its role in GWOt. However, there is criticism on Pakistani media for its random attitude in reporting such incidents. It is also argued that media persons sermonize anything and everything without considering the outcomes and national interest of the state.²

Pakistani media is facing a serious crisis of credibility and it has been blamed for spreading sensationalism. The trends of “Breaking News,” consistent and prolonged coverage of such events further adds chaos to the situation. Also, that it has become a statement-driven news operation which mingles facts and opinions. The media, being itself targeted, seems to be left in limbo to take any clear cut stance on issues like terrorism and national security.

After much criticism from the US, Pakistan finally launched military operation against local and foreign terrorists in North Waziristan Agency (NWA) on June 15, 2014. As Major General Waseem Bajwa termed the operation: “Zarb-e-Azb is the war of survival, this is the biggest and the most well-coordinated operation ever conducted against terrorists.” He further said that it was the beginning of the end for terrorism in the country.³

Since the operation was a very crucial and important in Pakistan’s long fight against terrorism, the researchers deemed it fit to analyse the print media coverage of the GWOt in its initial days. The overall coverage which was given by print media is the focus of the current study analysis. All stories from the main English newspapers including *Dawn*, *The News* and *The Nation* from June 16 to June 30,

¹Shabana Riaz, “Post 9/11 Peace Narrative in Pakistan,” PIPS, 2009, 3.

²Asian Media Barometer Pakistan 2012, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES Pakistan 2012), 2-4.

³Ghazi Salahuddin, “Will the Army Help me Please,” *News*, June 26, 2014.

2014 are included for analysis. Thus, this study explores media framing of GwoT in print media. The objective of the study is to highlight the lacunas existing in the media coverage of GwoT. The study highlights the way media altered state discourse of countering-terrorism through analysing content of the news coverage of selected case studies. The argument revolves around what was done, why it was done and what was left? What positive changes could be brought by reporting which was never reported? It brings out the argument to discuss media weaknesses according to the defined boundaries in constitution of Pakistan. Freedom of expression and state integrity both are brought together for discussion.

This paper argues that Pakistani media's coverage of the Operation Zarb-e-Azb is biased and thus challenging the state's discourse on counter-terrorism. It is far from being neutral and acts irresponsibly mocking the ethics of journalism.

Theoretical Framework

Theory applicable to the subject is Framing Theory which is an extension of Agenda-setting Theory which has been developed by McCombs and Shaw.⁴ According to the theory, media sets the agenda for public discussion and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It sets dimensions of public discussions at all levels. Low literacy rate in Pakistan has strengthened this power of media even more in the country. The basis of Framing Theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Framing is an important topic since it can have a big influence, therefore, the concept of framing expands to organizations as well.

The media draws the public attention to certain topics and those topics decide what people should think about, while the journalists select the topics. The way in which the news is presented to audience is the choice made by reporters or editors and that information is delivered to people in the form of frames. Thus, according to the theory, a frame refers to the way media and media gatekeepers organise and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audiences interpret what they

⁴M.E. McCombs and D.L Shaw, The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36 (1986): 178-187.

are provided. Frames are abstract ideas that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence audience perception of the news. This form of agenda-setting not only tells what are the issue, but also, how to think about them. Framing leads to accept one meaning over another. The basis of Framing Theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning.

Methodology

The study applies content analysis to evaluate the slants and frames in the coverage of ‘War on Terror’ in Pakistan. Content analysis can be defined as a research technique for making replicable and valid interference and valid inference from data to their context⁵. Media content analysis is a specialized sub-set of content analysis, a well-established research methodology. Content analysis is used to study a broad range of ‘texts’ from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research to the narrative and form of films, TV programmes and the editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines.

The Operation Zarb-e-Azb has been selected as a case study in GWOt. For the purpose of content analysis, news coverage of *Dawn*, *The News* and *The Nation* during the Operation Zarb-e-Azab from June 15, 2014 to June 30, 2014, are kept under analysis. All stories from front and back pages, opinions and editorials addressing GWOt are units of analysis. Apart from identifying information, each story is coded for topic owning of conflict, sensationalism, IDPs, military image, Taliban image, Pakistan war, militants, solution of conflict etc. Rationale for selecting the leading newspapers for the analysis is that the readership of these newspapers is opinion leaders in various aspects of life. This readership includes journalists, lawyers, judges, businessmen, scholars, military and political leaders.

Analysis of the Media Coverage of Operation Zarb-e-Azb

All stories from front and back pages, opinions and editorials from the mentioned English newspapers are included for analysis of the

⁵Klaus Krippendorff, “Content Analysis,” in *An Introduction to Its Methodology Third Edition* (Sage Publications, 2013), 23.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb. It is pertinent to mention that initially the media coverage was tremendous but it decreased sharply in the next few days of operation. Both, print and electronic media, reportedly, quoted what was released by ISPR. That may be the reason of less accessibility but whatever was reported is debatable keeping in view the state's counter-terrorism efforts. It is also pertinent to mention that this is the most information-controlled operation, however, a comprehensive good approach to support the operation and the state is still far away.

The analyses of how the media covered the operation and the stories are divided on the bases of following factors:

- Military operation portrayed positively and /or negatively;
- Division between different political parties;
- Highlighting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) problems;
- Was the government appreciated or just criticized?

Findings and Analysis

The News published 123 stories including front and back pages, opinion articles and editorials. *The Nation* published 126 and *Dawn* published 119 stories. All stories were analysed on the basis of frames applied for the content analysis of the text of stories. Number and percentage of positive, negative and neutral stories are indicated in the table below. The number of total inspected stories is 368.

Table No. 1

Percentage of Positive, Negative and Neutral Stories

Newspapers	Total No. of Stories	Positive Stories/ Percentage	Negative Stories/ Percentage	Neutral/ Percentage
<i>Dawn</i>	119	67/ 56%	21/ 17 %	31/ 26%
<i>The Nation</i>	126	111/ 88%	9/ .07%	6/ .04%
<i>The News</i>	123	70/ 56%	27/ 21%	26/ 21%

Although most of the stories reported the operation in positive light, there was a good number of stories which reported it negatively. For instance, *The News* on the positive side reported: “On the civilian side of the equation, it is the obligation of every institution of the state and every organ of the society to complement Pakistan Army’s unity of command with an undiluted unity of effort. The war would have to be fought at four levels: a) ground battle by Pakistan Army; b) ideological by the civil society; c) financial by the Federal Government and d) legal through the establishment of military tribunals.”⁶ However, this study focuses on the negatively portrayed coverage.

After analysing the above given stories, following information is gathered as negative reporting of Operation Zarb-e-Azb. The findings are given in details in the following paragraphs.

Criticism on the Operation and Military

The News editorial on Tuesday, June 17, 2014, published that the full-fledged operation brings to an end the peace accord reached with the Taliban in 2007. It quoted Haji Gul Bahadur, the key pro-Taliban commander in the area, who said that the agreement was violated under which the military had given them time till June 20, 2014 to get rid of foreign elements in the area.

The News reported: “the army action raises questions about the matter of how relations with groups in [North Waziristan Agency] (NWA) and the military may have changed, and if we are now looking at things from a different angle as far as the approach to militancy in our country, and in the region, goes.”⁷ Another argument was presented in *Dawn* as: “The military establishment seems to be lost in transition. The failure to achieve this transition may lead not to the break-up of Pakistan but to a country which is medieval in its outlook, engrossed in perpetual domestic violent conflicts and a constant migraine for the world. Not a nice place to live even for our brave soldiers.”⁸

⁶Dr Farrukh Saleem, “The Unity of Effort,” *News*, June 22, 2014.

⁷Editorial, “Waging War,” *News*, June 17, 2014.

⁸Faisal Siddique, “Lost in Transition,” *Dawn*, June 28, 2014.

The army was also criticized for carrying out propaganda. For instance, *The News* reported that the operation had been accompanied by propaganda assuring us that this time we would fight to our last breathe and eliminate the militant threat for good. What was being hidden from us was the crucial information of what made this operation different to the many we had previously undertaken.⁹

The News and *Dawn* criticized military by raising many questions on legality of the Operation. *The News* on June 22, 2014 stated, it “is demoralizing for the military and casts doubts on military establishment’s image. Military and civil government was “unable” to foresee the coming crisis after launching the operation in NWA.”*The Nation* narrated operation and the military in a way, which was encouraging for the forces and relieving for general public where as, terrorists were framed negatively.

Criticism on the Government

Geo TV’s Jirga in one of its programmes highlighted the failure of the government in not holding successful talks with TTP.¹⁰ Further, it criticized the inability of the government to manage the Operation Zarb-e-Azb properly.¹¹

The witnesses quoted also expressed their dissatisfaction in many of the news items. *The News* article, quoted the failure of the government at federal and provincial levels. It further said that air strikes have been occurring since January, and the inevitability of military action was plain to see, for all those who wanted to see.¹²

The government and the military are criticized in the following words in *The News*: “Although the government and armed forces were preparing to launch the operation and had discussed its details it seems

⁹Nadir Hassan, “The Somber Task of War,” *News*, June 19, 2014.

¹⁰“The ideological HQs of Terrorists,” *News*, June 30, 2014.

¹¹Mushtaq Yusuf Zai, “Ground operation launched in NWA,” *News*, June 16, 2014.

¹²Asim Zafar Khan, “Victory, Responsibility and Blame,” *News*, June 21, 2014.

both could not foresee the seriousness of the migration of several hundred thousand to safer places.”¹³

The News opinion page published on June 22, 2014 in a piece titled, “The spirit of Zarb-e-Azb”, writes that the leadership of the country had been unable to galvanize the people in a nationalist surge that was desperately needed to overwhelm the terrorist groups that had ruthlessly slaughtered more than 50,000 innocent citizens and caused US\$120 billion loss to the economy. The article added further that “the brief show of unity after the announcement of the North Waziristan operation evaporated like dew on the terrestrial hell that defined the political landscape of Pakistan.”¹⁴

The News, in another report, painted a dismal picture of Pakistan — conflicted and prone to strife.”¹⁵ *Dawn* stated “as is regrettably usual in Pakistan, delays, confusion and obfuscation in government and administrative circles have left citizens facing an uncertain future. After months of back and forth over talking to the terrorists, it was the assault on Karachi airport that apparently proved the fulcrum and prompted the state to send military forces into North Waziristan. Was the fallout on civilians fully thought through?”¹⁶

Dissatisfaction of the Locals

The News quoted a resident of NWA saying that though the people had long feared that the government was preparing for a military operation, the formal announcement on Sunday by the government sent a wave of terror and concern among the tribe’s people remaining in the trouble tribal region.¹⁷ Thus highlighting that the government could not bridge the trust deficit or communication gap. Salimullah Khan was quoted in another report saying: “We have lost contact with our relatives as some left for Punjab and others for different parts of Khyber

¹³ Ahmad Hassan, “IDPs of Waziristan not ready to live in government camps,” *News*, June 2, 2014.

¹⁴ S. Iftikhar Murshad, “The spirit of Zarb-e-Azb,” *News*, June 22, 2014.

¹⁵ Amir Zia, “Drift towards Anarchy,” *News*, June 16, 2014.

¹⁶ “Exodus begins,” *Dawn*, June 20, 2014.

¹⁷ Mushtaq Yusuf Zai, “Ground operation launched in NWA,” *News*, June 16, 2014.

Pakhtunkhwa.” He said that the government should have taken the tribal elders into confidence before setting up the camp in Bakkakhel.¹⁸

Civil-Military Relations

The dissonance in civil–military relations was also underlined in various stories. A story in *The News*, titled “Two Sharif’s on Same Page” stated “It is still unclear as to why the announcement of a comprehensive ‘military operation’ in North Waziristan came from the ISPR and not from the Government.” Though the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif categorically said “civil and military” leadership is on the same page on the launch of operation.”¹⁹ It also argued that the PML(N) camp was divided over talks and the operation since day one. It quoted the difference in the stances of Minister for Defence, Khawaja Asif and Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar with regard to operation and dialogue with the militants in the area.

An article in *Dawn* highlighted the existing difference of narratives among the four provinces and the army. It stated that the province of Punjab wants to curb terrorism but is also willing to enter into political dialogue with groups like Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan. The government in Sindh wants to end violence but has turned a blind eye to the militant wings of political parties, for example MQM, PPP and ANP.

Similarly, the government in Balochistan wants peace, but reportedly, is not on the same page with army/FC to deal with Baloch Nationalists.²⁰

Management of IDPs

There were positive as well as negative news about the efforts of government and military for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) management. The efforts to address the problems of IDPs were highlighted more by *The News* as compared to *The Nation* and *Dawn*. *The News* reported: “while many in the nation are celebrating the launch

¹⁸Barkatullah Marwat, “Out of camps IDPs facing countless problems,” *News*, June 17, 2014.

¹⁹Mazhar Abbas, “Two Sharifs on same page,” *News*, June 17, 2014

²⁰Tasneem Norrani, “War of Narratives,” *Dawn*, June 27, 2014.

of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan, in the anticipation of peace in the country, around 164,000 refugees who fled the area have very little to celebrate as their life is becoming increasingly difficult...refugees arriving in Bannu are greeted by a surfeit of problems ranging from lack of transport to shortage of food and medicine and rude attitude of law enforcing agencies”.²¹

In an article, “Winning Ground War, losing 500,000 Hearts and Minds” Farrukh Saleem in *The News*, criticized the government policy and mismanagement of IDPs.²² *Dawn* also reported, “the 2005 earthquake, we heard, was a national tragedy. What is this tragedy unfolding in North Waziristan? Is it ours or theirs, the innocents caught up in a war in a region that is so dangerous and so isolated you can’t even go there for disaster tourism?”²³

Unanimity of News Coverage

The number of stories published by all the three English newspapers was almost same with minor differences. However, ranking the three newspapers with regard to negative stories, *The News* was at the highest at 21 per cent, *Dawn* with 17 per cent and *The Nation* with 0.7 per cent. The number of neutral stories was higher in the *Dawn* as compared to the other two, where as *The Nation* stayed at the top publishing positive stories. The operation was given front page coverage in all the three newspapers on June. 16, 2014 However, the first published story of *The News* was negative besides quoting negative witnesses. *The Nation*, on the same day, mentioned witnesses from the same area giving positive views of the operation. There was marked decrease in the number of stories about operation Zarb-e-Azb because the print media, like the electronic media, also diverted its attentions towards the Model Town incident in Lahore and sit-in calls of Tahir-ul-Qadri and Imran Khan. The number of stories which stood at 24 initially,

²¹Wasim Abbasi, “Over 164,000 IDPs reach Bannu from NWA,”*News*, June 20, 2014.

²²Farrukh Saleem, “Winning Ground War, Losing 500,000 Hearts and Minds,”*News*, June 27, 2014.

²³Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “Orientation Lite,” *Dawn*, June 27, 2014.

was reduced to only two or three, obtained from press releases of ISPR, or statements by COAS General Raheel Shareef.

Regarding the state of coverage, media expert Adnan Rehmat said that the quality of reporting depends on the quality of sources.²⁴ According to him, the operation and the reporting on it comes from the security establishment. Security sources account for the bulk of the coverage and are twice as likely to be cited as the next most popular source, i.e., the government. It was also noted that experts, including defence analysts as well as the US officials, are also as likely to be cited as the residents of FATA.

No Appreciation of Forces

The newspapers ignored to appreciate the forces engaged in the operation as no success story was published. None of the newspapers gave any positive narrative of the valour, courage and sacrifices of the Pakistan Army which could help unite the nation in the support of the Operation Zarb-e-Azb or raise the morale of the forces. The only positive message of trust between the soldiers and the people was conveyed in *The Nation* by publishing the photographs of soldiers who were sitting with IDPs with smiling faces.

Projection of Taliban

Article 11 A sub section (c) and (f) of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 clearly states that, “an organization is concerned in terrorism if it promotes or encourages terrorism, fails to expel from its ranks or ostracize those who commit acts of terrorism and present them as heroic persons. Article 11 of the same act censures the printing, publishing, or disseminating any material to incite hatred or giving projection to any person convicted of a terrorist act or any prescribed organization or an organization placed under observation or anyone concerned in terrorism.”²⁵ It is clear that the media should never have published any

²⁴Adnan Rehmat, “No military victories without media support,” July 6, 2014, <http://www.freedomnetwork.org.pk/no-military-victories-without-media-support/>

²⁵The Anti Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997, <http://www.ppra.org.pk/doc/anti-t-act.pdf>

statement or message from TTP or any other banned outfit as they promote terrorists knowingly or unknowingly.

Humane Angle of the Coverage

All newspapers gave extensive coverage to the IDPs which adds a positive and humane aspect to the stories. Problems of IDPs were highlighted in detail in editorial and opinion pages to help the displaced people. But the main thing observed was lack of IDPs' narrative in the stories. The donation or requirement of funds to fulfil the needs of IDPs can hardly be estimated without a proper survey. This has been missing for the subsequent operation's affected displaced persons. The coverage was more opinionated lacking investigative coverage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The content analysis of the three major dailies of Pakistan: *Dawn*, *The News* and *The Nation* for the two weeks coverage of Operation Zarb-e-Azb since its launch reflects the negative framing of its coverage. While focusing on the negative framing of the operation, it is observed that the papers presented dissatisfaction over the launch of the operation. They pointed towards the civil-military divide, futility of the operation, highlighted the negative fallout, problems faced by the IDPs, locals' mistrust of the government, and a divide within the government. However, the paper does not agree with the use of force to counter militants. The study also found that the reporting of the newspapers, except *The Nation*, were biased regarding the operation. The stories were inadequately sourced with no investigative reporting while relying mainly on the statements of ISPR, the government and the US officials. Moreover, the reporting significantly fell as the media attention was diverted to the sit-ins at D-Chowk by Tahir-ul-Qadri and Imran Khan. To conclude, the problem with Pakistani newspapers is not how they cover incidents of terrorism but how they frame it.

The media plays a central role in the calculus of political violence and it can magnify or minimize the effects of a particular story or remain neutral in its coverage. Terrorism must be reported, however, the way the events are covered and framed is also significant. The media has to

change its narrative of terrorism-related news stories to alter the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media by presenting the stories in a less sensational way. Achieving this may not only prevent terrorists from using media coverage as an important publicity tool but also help deal with an atmosphere of fear. It will also help the government and security apparatus to make more rational decisions regarding countering terrorism and dealing with public outrage. Hence, news coverage with less repetition of dreadful scenes, less traumatization, less sensationalization and more information and cautiousness are essential in the first place to break the symbiosis. The study, thus suggests the following recommendations.

According to the Media Policy Centre, which carries out research on the media, journalistic training should ideally be at four levels. Knowledge and skills should be emphasized at the primary level. The second is at the institutional level to enable professionals to fit and work in conformity with the editorial policy of any enterprise. The third is, the personal one where every journalist must be encouraged to improve through constant research, reading, experimentation and discussions with experts and expand his/her level of knowledge in various subjects of interest especially in areas of his/her interest to become a specialist of the beat. At the fourth level, the organization itself should train journalists for special reporting areas, for example conflict reporting and terrorism. This is the actualization phase of the training. To attain the required level of professionalism, training can be organized by way of professional workshops, seminars and symposia with experienced journalists of the same line of reporting.²⁶

Media industry should be endorsed with a set of minimum standards of professionalism that should include journalistic ethics, as well as an enforcement mechanism that, while embracing best practices and higher ideals of freedom of expression and access to information, also integrate complaints and rectifying mechanisms to preempt extremist positions.

²⁶“Theoretical Perspectives to Terrorism and the Media,” Media Policy Center, n.d., <http://www.mediapolicycentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Revised-Paper-on-Media-and-Terrorism-3.pdf>.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb

The government should provide security to national and internal journalists as the pressures and threats coming from terrorists hamper the actual role of media. There is need for coordinated and collaborative intervention strategies, better defined policies from the state and media that guarantees freedom of expression.

For a successful counter terrorism strategy, media should not misreport or overemphasize in a manner that is against the national interest of Pakistan or gives an advantage to the terrorists or other forces operating against the state of Pakistan. Ministry of Information and Ministry of Interior should take media organizations into confidence and the media owners and professionals should regard and adhere to the rules set by the government to streamline the passage of filtered information.

A pro-active approach should be adopted for crucial societal issues. For example, the media can play crucial role in addressing measures of controlling and resisting radicalization of the youth, techniques of disaster preparedness and prevention and dealing with post-attack trauma. Such information would enhance the capability of ordinary citizens in dealing with the aftermaths of a terrorist attack more constructively.