

Pakistani TV Channels and their Field Strategy in Covering the Osama bin Laden's Death

Amir Hamza Marwan* and Major Abdul Wadood**

Abstract

This research study examines the nature of news items on aired on three TV channels of Pakistan, while covering the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The three channels include private broadcasters Geo News and Dunya News, and public broadcaster Pakistan Television News (PTV News). The content of these TV channels has been studied for ten consecutive days, starting from May 2, 2011, when Osama bin Laden was killed in the U.S. operation. The findings, based on the Quantitative Content Analysis, show that both the public and private broadcasters of Pakistan relied heavily on the 'table stories' to report the event for its viewers – besides little field strategy for the media coverage of the issue from the field. The less 'boots on the ground' show that the Pakistani TV channels did not explore the event in investigative line, and thus relied heavily on the studio productions.

Key Words: Osama bin Laden's Killing, Nature of News Items, Table Stories, Investigative Reporting.

Introduction

Osama bin Laden was shot dead by the U.S. Navy SEALs in 'Operation Neptune Spear' on May 2, 2011. The killing of Osama bin Laden was the biggest news story for almost all the TV channels around the world. It is worth noting that the Associated Press declared it the biggest news story of the year 2011. Soon after the American officials confirmed the event, nearly all the major TV networks abandoned their routine transmissions and started giving special round-the-clock coverage to it by debating it from different perspectives.

Since the event happened in Pakistani city Abbottabad, the major focus of most TV channels went there as well. The international media outlets started covering the event from Abbottabad and the situation reached up to the point that the

* Dr. Amir Hamza Marwan, Lecturer, Dept. of Journalism & Mass Com., University of Peshawar. E-mail: hamzamarwan@uop.edu.pk

** Major Abdul Wadood, Inter Services Public Relations, Peshawar

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) put ban on live coverage of foreign TV channels from Abbottabad.¹ It is pertinent to look at the nature of news items on aired by the Pakistani TV channels, who were host to the event. It will help us understand that did they rely on the studio-based production to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death to the Pakistani audience, or did they cover it field-based? Less 'boots on the ground' will mean that the original story – based on investigative reporting – was not explored to the audience.

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

- a) What is the nature of news items on aired on TV channels?
- b) Did the TV channels mix different categories of the nature of news items in the stories?

The findings will help us understand the on-field and off-field strategy of Pakistani TV channels to cover this crucial issue that put Pakistan in hot waters for a long time. In addition, it will also inform us whether the story was told in pieces by relying on a single category; or the different categories (about the nature of news items described below) were combined to connect the dots, in order to explain the issue in a better way to the audience.

Literature Review

Nord and Strömbäck claim that the two crises are never identical; still, if the journalists want to inform the public in a better way, it depends upon two things: existence of the previous media routine and the ability of media to make adequate preparations.² They claim that if there is no precedent of the coverage of a similar incident before, and also, if the journalists are not (mentally) prepared (for its coverage), there is little hope that 'high quality' reporting can be ensured, or the citizen can be better informed. Nord and Strömbäck further claim that to ask 'where' the journalists are based may be trivial, but it is essential element in ensuring objective and balanced reporting – besides their ability to move freely in the conflict zone.³ They stressed: "In war reporting it is relevant to ask *where* journalists are working, *when* journalists are publishing the results of their work and, perhaps most importantly, *how* journalists are working within the media organization". They claim that if the media outlets, instead of their original reporting, rely on others to cover the event, there is a

risk that ‘incorrect’ information will spread.⁴ They conclude that ‘relatively prepared’ war correspondents, covering the initial U.S. attacks on Afghanistan from the Pakistani border, did a better job than most of the ‘confused’ local TV news crew a few blocks away from the World Trade Centre in the United States.⁵

Pande confirms that ‘geographic proximity’ defines the ‘nature’ and strength of the coverage given to particular events. While doing research on the coverage of terrorism by *The New York Times* and three other U.S. networks, he concluded that both factors were important – especially for TV news. It is also believed that local coverage of any event may be more solid as the local journalists usually have more resources, besides having good access to such sources.⁶

If we look at the coverage of War on Terror in Pakistan, considered one of the danger zones for reporting globally, we know that it is difficult for the reporters to look into an issue independently.⁷ On one hand the journalists are scared of the ire of the government, and on the other hand there are violent Taliban.

The hit list of militants in Swat would also have names of some prominent journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which forced the International Federation of Journalists and Reporters without Borders to write a letter to the then President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, asking him to take measures for the safety of the journalists.⁸ Despite all these difficulties, one can still expect better coverage from the Pakistani media outlets as more than 96% of the Pakistani journalists claim that their mission is to analyze complex issues.⁹

Lawson, while looking at the death coverage of Osama bin Laden across the *BBC*, *CNN* and *Al Jazeera English*; found out that the highest number of (non-studio) places were covered by the *Al Jazeera English* which is eleven, followed by nine covered by the *BBC* and then eight by *CNN*. He claimed that all the three TV channels relied on their own strength and told the story of Osama bin Laden’s death to their audience. *Al Jazeera* is more committed to give voice to the ‘Global South’ and tried to give the Middle-Eastern and South Asian picture of the issue; *CNN* gave more coverage from to the US as they believe that their audience is more interested in the US or US-version of the world events; while the *BBC* – which has no strong regional connection – tried to find a middle ground with broader global balance in its coverage. The findings of this study show that all the three world leading TV channels did not cover (much of) the event from the studio, but they

indeed covered it from the field via its reporters in different countries.¹⁰

Research Framework

This research study is based on the content analysis of the news items on aired on three major TV channels of Pakistan. It includes the popular private TV channels – *Geo News* and *Dunya News*, and public broadcaster *Pakistan Television News (PTV News)*.

Geo News is considered the most resourceful and popular TV channel in Pakistan. It enjoys higher viewership than other private TV channels in Pakistan. It is available on the internet, cable, smartphones and even on satellite receivers.

Dunya News is also considered one of the most popular TV channels of Pakistan, after *Geo News*. It has its head office in Lahore and is known for its center-right policy.

Pakistan Television News (PTV News), an official broadcaster, was also selected in this research study due to its higher terrestrial reach and viewership than the other private Pakistani TV channels. It is important to compare the nature of content of the news items with the private broadcasters, as it will show the holistic picture of the coverage from Pakistan. Every news story that contained the name ‘Osama’, ‘Osama bin Laden’, ‘bin Laden’, and ‘al-Qaeda’ was selected, studied and coded.

The content of these TV channels has been studied for ten consecutive days – ranging from the day of Osama bin Laden’s death (May 2, 2011 till May 11, 2011). Two news bulletins, 3 o’clock afternoon and 9 o’clock night, were studied in the coverage of each TV channel as they are considered the main news bulletins. A total of 216 news stories of *Geo News*, 184 of *Dunya News* and 63 of *PTV News* were studied and coded in this research study – which cumulatively make 463 news items.

Research Methodology

Content Analysis was employed in the current study to answer the research questions. Researchers usually approve content analysis when ‘explicit’ research questions or hypotheses are raised. The nature of research questions in this study is clear, having no ambiguity at all.¹¹

Charles R. Wright defines content analysis as “the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories.”¹²

Similarly, Holsti argues that such ‘specified characteristics of messages’ should be identified ‘objectively and

systematically'. A similar procedure is followed in this study in which different categories of news items, aired on three selected TV channels, were defined and then coded objectively.¹³

The same stands true for this research study in which different news items were coded in different categories, and then opinion was placed on the broader comparative coverage given to the issue by the selected TV channels. All these arguments make this methodology appropriate for this research study to answer the questions in a better way.

This study uses Shoemaker and Reese's theoretical concept of *news routines*. According to Shoemaker and Reese, news routines are "those patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs".¹⁴ These routines, they contend, are created in response to the limited resources of the news organization and the vast amount of information that can be used in the construction of news. These routines are not voluntary; they are dictated by deadline and norms among other factors. Therefore, journalists, most of the time, construct news from available raw materials in a constrained environment, which, at times, compromise objectivity only to meet the deadline. Thus, news, instead of a mirror of reality becomes an aspect of reality out there.¹⁵

Nature of Content of News' Item

In order to code the news items – to understand the nature of the content, 12 different categories were created in the coding sheet that is given in the table below. It must be noted that in each news item, three options were available to code various categories. It can be best understood as: suppose a newscaster introduces the news, it is then followed by a package made by the reporter, and is then followed by interaction of the newscaster with an expert on the subject. So, it has been coded as "Package made by the Reporter" and "Live telephonic conversation with expert by a newscaster". So if any particular news item is based only on the table story – containing only the monologue of the newscaster or narrator in the news item with no other inputs like interviewing its own reporter about the news or conducting interview with expert about it – then it is coded as 'table story.' The other two available options in the coding sheet have been coded with "No" in such cases.

Table 4: Nature or Format of Content of News Story

TVC	RP	MN F	LTI 1	LTI 2 s	LTI 3	LTI 4	LT 15	Mo N1	Mo N2	IWE	A O	T O C
<i>Geo</i>	16 7%	90 41 %	8 4%	0 0%	11 5%	1 0.5 %	4 2%	65 30%	5 2%	4 2%	4 6 %	28 10 %
<i>Dunya</i>	18 9%	46 24 %	20 10 %	1 0.5 %	12 6%	0 0%	1 0.5 %	80 42%	0 0%	0 0%	7 %	12 10 %
<i>PTV</i>	3 4.5 %	54 82 %	1 1.5 %	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 4.5 %	0 0%	0 0%	5 7 %	61 00 %
Total	37	190	29	1	23	1	5	148	5	4	3 3	47 6

Acronyms Explanation:

TVC: TV Channels, RP: Reporter Package,
 MNF: Monologue of Newscasters' Flat News
 LTI1: Live telephonic interaction with reporter by Newscaster/s (Beeper)
 LTI2: Live telephonic interaction with reporter plus expert by newscaster/s
 LTI3: Live Interaction with Expert/s by Newscaster/s
 LTI4: Live interaction with Expert/s by Reporter
 LTI5: Live Interaction with eye witnesses/ Local People by Reporter
 MoN1: Monologue of Narrator in report (Background Voice).
 MoN2: Monologue of other TV Anchor (Flat News).
 IWE: Interaction with Expert by TV Anchor
 AO: Any other, TOC: Total options coded

Data Analysis & Discussion

The data establishes that all three TV channels hardly relied on ground production to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death and its aftermath. All the three TV channels were heavily reliant on 'table stories' to fill the air space. The term 'Table Stories' are used for those particular stories in which the reporter does not go to the field for production, but relies on the internet and other sources (like browsing the online news sites, monitoring different news services or even treating the press releases or handouts issued by organizations) to collect information and data about any event to file a story over it. Therefore, such news items are mostly broadcasted in plain form in the background voice of its reporter/newscaster/ or of its anchor. It does not have any sound bite of the expert/ eyewitness or local people. The footage to support such reports is taken from the archives (old footage). In this research study, the term "Table Story" has been used collectively for all the monologues of the newscaster, narrator and even of any other TV anchor.

The *Geo News*, in its coverage, showed much reliance on 'Table stories' – 73% – almost three-fourth of its whole coverage. Out of these 73 per cent, 41 per cent consist of monologues of the newscaster; 30 per cent consist of monologues of the narrator in a report; while 2 per cent consists of monologue of another TV anchor. The packages made by the reporters of *Geo news* consist of only 7 per cent of its overall coverage; while the experts contacted by reporter, newscaster or TV anchor made only 7.5 per cent. The overall interaction with the reporter itself stands for only 4 per cent. The findings show that *Geo News* has relied heavily to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death to its viewers from studio-based production. Additionally, it also shows that the *Geo News* was having no proper 'field strategy' to cover the event from the ground, due to less number of production of packages, or even less interaction with its reporter on the ground as one would have expected from the popular local media outlet to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death. The less 'boots on the ground' of *Geo News* reporters show that they hardly investigated the event on their own for their viewers.

It is also important to note that only two news stories in the whole coverage of the *Geo News* were the combination of both 'monologue of newscaster' and 'live telephonic interaction with expert by the newscaster'. In other words, only two out of 216 news items on-aired were the combination of different categories. It means that the most appropriate structure of TV news (which is followed by the Western media, especially *BBC*) was almost missing in the *Geo News* coverage. The most appropriate structure of TV news can best be understood from the following standard example:

When a newscaster starts reading the news and tells the viewers about an incident, then he/she turns to a reporter in the field for fresh available updates or contacts the expert for more in-depth analysis on the issue, or even on-airs a package made by its reporter. The point is that in order to tell a story about an incident to the viewers, the Western TV channels (especially the *BBC*) will try to accommodate all the relevant information together which exist in the form of different bits, and will link the different segments together. This style of telling the story to the viewers was missing in the *Geo news*.

The same impression – about the reliance on the studio-based production – can be observed in the coverage of the *Dunya News* as almost two-third of its coverage – 66% - consisted of 'table stories' (based on monologues). Out of these 66 per cent

coverage, 24 per cent (almost one-fourth) of the coverage consists of monologue of newscaster; while 42 per cent consists of monologue of the narrator in a report. The production of different packages in the coverage consists of only 9 per cent; live telephonic interaction with reporter consists of 10 per cent; while expert contacted for the comments (by both reporter and newscaster) is only 7 per cent.

Although the findings above support the view that like the *Geo News*, the *Dunya News* also showed reliance on 'Table Stories' to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death, but it also shows that they have performed slightly better than *Geo News* in terms of statistics on the board. The *Dunya News* produced more packages than the *Geo News*; they contacted their reporters on the ground more than the *Geo News*; and even showed less reliance on 'Table Stories' as compared to *Geo News*. But the only category in which both stayed almost similar was their interaction with an expert, which was almost 7 per cent in both. However, these figures still show some level of concerns about the 'field strategy' of the *Dunya News* to tell the story of Osama bin Laden's death to its viewers. One can observe the 'boots on the ground', but, being the host of the local event, one would have expected more from the *Dunya News* as well. It also shows that they did not have proper 'on-field' and 'off-field' strategy as well to cover such a big event for its viewers.

It is also important to note that 7 out of 184 news items were the combination of one or another category. So, we can observe that the most appropriate structure of telling the news (which we have discussed above) was not dominant in the *Dunya News* coverage. Apparently, it also shows that the culture of reporting the TV news (up to the structure in which it is delivered to the viewers) in Pakistan is different from the Western media outlets like *BBC*.

The nature of the coverage of the script of *Pakistan Television News (PTV News)* even lag behind *Geo* and the *Dunya News* as 86.5 per cent of the overall coverage consists of 'table stories' (based on the monologues of the newscasters/ narrators). It consists of 82 per cent monologue of newscaster in news items; followed by 4.5 percent monologue of narrator in report. The packages made by the reporters consist of only 4.5 per cent (3 packages), while live telephonic interaction with reporter was made only once. It is important to note that no contact was made with expert in their coverage. Again, the findings give us the impression that proper 'field strategy' to cover the event from the

ground was missing in the coverage of the official broadcaster of Pakistan.

PTV News is the terrestrial channel of Pakistan, and it covers more geography of Pakistan than any other TV channel; so keeping this in view, one would have expected much more from them (in terms of production, interaction with reporter or expert). It is also important to note that there was no news item, which was the combination of either of these identified different categories. So the trend started by the *Geo News* and the *Dunya News* – to tell the story in ‘solo’ category form – continued very well here.

The findings show that there is a strong possibility that the ‘original’ story – which comes through investigative reporting, as stated by Thussu and Freedman¹⁶, was perhaps missing in the coverage of all the three TV channels due to their heavy reliance on ‘table’ stories rather than on ground production in different forms.¹⁶

Conclusion

This article examined the nature of news items on aired on three TV channels of Pakistan – *Geo News*, *Dunya News* and *PTV News* – while covering the killing of Osama bin Laden. The findings, based on the content analysis, show that all the three TV channels of Pakistan majorly covered the event from the studio, but it is still important to note that *Dunya News* touched the ground more than *Geo News* and *PTV News* – though the figures are not that much significant.

More reliance on the studio-based production shows that all the three TV channels had no ‘on-field’ strategy to cover this event from Pakistan. It gives the impression that the TV channels were hardly interested to explore the investigative lines attached to the story. Being local to the event, one would have expected them to explore it in that way. Though, they debated the issue on screen, but they remained off-field (in the studio).

The findings also support that the story of Osama bin Laden’s death and its aftermath was told in pieces – rather than linking different categories of the nature of news items to form a base for good public opinion. It might be the culture of Pakistani TV channels to broadcast news in such format, but it is equally debatable as it does not connect the dots (or different developments together). This supports Shoemaker and Reese’s concept of news routines. The news organizations, in a bid to meet the deadline, presented the news of Osama bin Laden’s killing in pieces instead of making it a coherent news story.

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