

Shabbir Hussain

## Reporting on terror: Why are the voices of peace unheard?

*Kurzfassung:* Textanalysen mit Feldbeobachtungen verbindend, untersucht die vorliegende Studie, wie die pakistanischen Medien über den im Nordwesten des Landes andauernden Konflikt mit den Taliban berichten. Gestützt auf die Framing-Theorie zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass die pakistanischen Taliban als Hauptverantwortliche für die andauernde Gewalt im Land porträtiert werden und als Feindbild dienen. Die Darstellung der Opfer des Konfliktes dient - um es mit den Worten eines Stammesangehörigen auszudrücken - eher dem Medieninteresse an ‚blutenden Gesichtern‘ als der Darstellung einer sich entfaltenden humanitären Krise. Friedensjournalistische Ansätze werden dagegen durch die vorherrschende Betonung des Sicherheitsaspektes und die Tendenz unterlaufen, die Sichtweise der betroffenen Bevölkerung zu ignorieren.

*Abstract:* This study combines critical textual analysis with field observations to investigate how Pakistani media have covered the ongoing conflict with the Taliban in the North-West of the country. Using framing theory as its theoretical basis, the study found that the Pakistani Taliban are portrayed as chiefly responsible for the ongoing violence in the country, by placing them within the frame of an enemy image. The victims in the conflict were found to be dismissive of the media's tendency to show greater interest in 'bleeding faces', to quote a tribesman, rather than in portraying the unfolding of a major humanitarian crisis. The peace journalism model is limited by the prevailing media emphasis on the security aspect of this conflict and their tendency to ignore popular perspectives.

### 1. Introduction

From time immemorial, conquerors and invaders have used the available media to propagate their viewpoints. Communication researchers have studied in depth how demagogic leaders, from Alexander the Great, Darius, Julius Caesar and Napoleon, to Hitler, Stalin, Mao and scores of others, have harnessed the media to win support for militaristic policies (Knightly, 2003; Ottosen, 2008). Reportage on violent events that can exacerbate conflicts is considered more newsworthy by mainstream journalists than reportage that promotes peaceful conflict resolution. This is due to established standards of journalistic news values (Galtung & Lynch, 2010; Fawcett, 2002; Wolsfeld, 2004), which escalate conflicts through incitement, stereotyping and fomenting disillusionment with the peace process (Bratic, 2006).

According to the media theorists Severin and Tankard (1992), conflicting parties resort to propaganda to legitimize their pro-war stances and to win public support. Critical studies on war reporting have found that media often become parties to conflicts and do not remain a simple 'mirror' of events and a detached, objective commentator (Lynch, 2008; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Kempf, 2007). They significantly change the impact and process by which conflict unfolds (Galtung, 2002; Kempf, 2003). Memories were still fresh when the media in Rwanda and Burundi were actually involved in conflict, becoming tools of war through incitement and propaganda, leading to the worst pogroms in recent history (Bratic, 2006). Other examples are the various cases of mass violence in Eastern Europe during the world wars, and the American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, where thousands of innocent people were killed, a situation that might have been averted if peace had been given a chance (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Ottosen, 2008; Bratic, 2006).

Although there is a great range of possibilities for using the media to promote peace, these tend to be under-studied and are often simply ignored (Bläsi, 2004). According to peace researcher Syed Abdul Siraj (2006), the media's obsession with war has been a major concern for the conflicting parties, peace researchers and media practitioners. If media have an ethical responsibility to society, it is essential to report on conflicts contextually and call attention to the underlying causes (Galtung, 2002; Kovarik, 2007).

This study aims to textually analyze the reporting of the conflict with the Taliban in Pakistan's two prestigious English-language newspapers; the daily *Dawn* and the daily *News*, over a period of three months. Additionally, this researcher visited the war-torn Khyber Agency (the Khyber Pass is the most northerly and important mountain pass between Pakistan and Afghanistan; the Pakistani government controls the pass with the Khyber Agency), and talked to internally displaced persons in Peshawar to get a fair idea of (a) how local people see the conflict, (b) why they are ignored in media discourse, and (c) to seek solutions from them. The study was conducted in a difficult period when, on the one hand, there were efforts to achieve rapprochement and, on the other hand, there was a growing demand by the media for violent use of force against the Taliban.

#### 1.1 Background of the Taliban conflict

The Taliban uprising in Pakistan started after the 9/11 attacks on the US, when the country joined the global alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan, who were claimed to have provided safe havens to Al Qaeda terrorists. Pakistan was pressured to aid the global alliance, as explained by then Pakistani ruler General Pervez Musharraf (2007), who claimed that the US

had threatened to 'return Pakistan to the Stone Age if it did not deliver on US demands'. But this assistance to the world community came at a huge price for Pakistan itself; the decision to station soldiers in the border areas near Afghanistan offended the local tribesmen and the sympathizers of the Taliban regime, who took up arms against the Pakistani forces. Thus far, according to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, as many as 50,000 soldiers and innocent civilians have been killed, many more wounded, and the economic loss has passed the 1 trillion dollar mark (*Geo TV report*, June 2013).

To get a fair understanding of this conflict, it is essential to present a brief history of the events that led up to it. Though there are different narrations, I try to remain neutral in summarizing the key events that led to this war between Pakistan's army and Taliban fighters. Ahmed Rashid (2001), a well-known security expert, agrees that this conflict must be discussed starting with the aftermath of the Cold War between America and Russia. The USSR's misadventure in Afghanistan in 1979 provided an opportunity for the US to avenge the Vietnam defeat. The US, along with its Western allies, persuaded Pakistan to recruit the Mujahiddin (now Al Qaeda terrorists) in the tribal areas of Pakistan. They were drawn in from all over the world, trained and equipped and sent to Afghanistan to fight against the 'communist infidels'. That war continued for over a decade, with unimaginable human costs, misery and tribulations that will haunt the Afghans and Pakistani tribesmen for generations to come (Clinton, 2010). With the demise of the USSR, the Western powers lost interest in the area and left without taking any responsibility for the war-ravaged populace. The next five or six years saw Afghans fighting for power, which culminated in Taliban supremacy. The same account basically holds true for the Pakistani tribal areas, which were left by the authorities to fend for themselves once global interests receded in the region. These areas were mired in lawlessness and became an epicenter for smuggling and the spread of lethal weaponry; bereft of all the benefits and advantages of the modern world (Khan, 2013).

The Pakistani tribal areas hit the global radar screen after the 9/11 attacks, when the US and allied forces drove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in an intensive three-month military operation. Pakistan was tasked to check the Taliban inflow to Afghanistan and in return received financial support. In July 2002, Pakistani troops entered the two tribal districts of South and North Waziristan bordering Afghanistan. This was the first time that Pakistani troops entered the autonomous tribal areas, in total defiance of the pledge by the founder of the nation, who had promised non-interference in the tribal areas (Siraj & Shabbir, 2011).

The stationing of hundreds of thousands of Pakistani troops in the tribal areas to counter the Taliban influx in those times has now degenerated into a full-scale war between security forces and local Taliban fighters. At present, Pakistani forces are patrolling all seven tribal areas and the adjacent areas and engaging in pitched battles with Taliban fighters. The latter have more local support than the former and hence are thriving on local illiteracy and poverty. More than 12 years down the road, force has become the dominant strategy preferred by the two sides. Off and on, there were attempts to resolve this conflict amicably, but these efforts never materialized, due to the ambivalence of the Pakistani army, US pressure and sheer criticism by the so-called liberals in Pakistani society of giving in to 'barbarians' (Shabbir, 2012).

Pakistan's army has so far signed three peace agreements with the Taliban, apart from a few local deals that were reached between the two sides. The first deal was signed in 2004, but before anything positive could come of it, the Taliban leader was killed. The killers could not be identified, but tribal affairs experts say this was the work of groups 'who opposed peace agreements'. The second deal was reached in 2005, but again the reconciling Taliban leader, Abdullah Mehsud, was killed in a US drone attack. The US had opposed peace deals with the Pakistani Taliban for various reasons. The third peace agreement was signed in 2008 between Pakistan's government and the Taliban in the Swat area. Like the first two deals, before it could materialize, Pakistani forces launched a major military operation in the area. Although the Taliban were defeated and the use of military means was successful, the Taliban retaliated with suicide attacks (which continue even today), killing hundreds of people, including police and military personnel.

Now, the government of Pakistan, newly elected in May 2013, is planning to reconcile with the Taliban for the sake of peace. This is the toughest decision, as Pakistani elites and centralized media houses oppose peace agreements with the Taliban. Surprisingly, though the differences between Pakistani mainstream society and the Taliban are discussed at length, the similarities are never mentioned. As is often pointed out by Imran Khan, the head of Pakistan's second largest party, Tehreek-e-Insaf, the interests of the two sides are not completely incompatible. Pakistan's Taliban demand the cessation of support for the US in the global alliance against terror and the imposition of Islamic law in the tribal areas. Pakistan will not lose much if these demands are met. In fact, as pointed out by Mr. Khan, this war on terror has been a major foreign policy failure on the part of Pakistan, and the sooner it ends, the better. On their account, the Taliban need to eschew violence and reach an agreement with the state for an enduring solution to this conflict.

## 1.2 Peace Journalism

According to Johan Galtung (2000), conflicts arise due to incompatible goals, which are often the result of a denial of basic human needs, including cultural and national identity, liberty and access to opportunities. Scholars (Galtung 2002; Kempf,

2003; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005) believe the media are important cultural forces that have a strong influence on how conflicts are escalated and resolved. Peace media researcher Majid Tehranian (2002) adds that while media can be agents of violence, as many experts have concluded, they can also serve peaceful ends, if the right strategies are adopted.

Johan Galtung and Wilhelm Kempf must be credited with introducing the concept of 'Peace Journalism' in the 1990s by critically analyzing media roles in conflicts. Galtung (2000) defined peace as non-violence and creativity in conflict resolution. He advocated creativity in conflict resolution, where media can play an important role, suggesting ways and means of finding win-win solutions. Galtung discussed media roles as either intensifying conflicts, which he called *war journalism*, or resolving conflicts, which he called *peace journalism*. Earlier, Wilhelm Kempf introduced the concepts of escalation and de-escalation frames to describe media roles in conflicts. The former report on conflict as an uncompromising battle and focus on a party that wins, and they assess losses quantitatively (how many killed, wounded, and the loss of property). Chances for peace are ridiculed, and evidence of brutality and atrocities is provided to sensationalize media discourse. On the other hand, peace journalism tries to present the real causes of conflicts, gives equal coverage to all parties and interests, and prioritizes peace over violence (Galtung, 2000). Two of Galtung's students, the renowned journalists and peace scholars Annabel McGoldrick and Jake Lynch (2005), developed the concept further and characterized it as an approach that offers a better account of events by taking cues from peace studies and conflict resolution techniques. They explain that peace journalism provides an opportunity for reporters and editors to decide "what to report and how to report" it, thus enhancing the chances for peace by choosing more creative, reconciliatory approaches.

The dichotomy of war and peace journalism has been widely used by researchers to investigate the role of media in conflicts. On the other hand, there is no dearth of experts who criticize peace journalism for its advocacy role (this is presumably not the job of reporters) and impracticality. Jake Lynch, the most influential scholar of peace journalism, in a recent book (*A global standard for conflict reporting*) has discussed these issues in exhaustive detail. Drawing on the works of European social theorists, he locates peace journalism as a critical realist theory, which is cognizant of the need for objectivity but still emphasizes that taking a critical stance is one of the key aspects of responsible journalism. Jake Lynch has critically analyzed specific incidents of conflict in different parts of the world and concludes that the concept has the potential to rectify many weaknesses and defects in traditional journalism. Like Lynch (2013), German peace psychology researcher Wilhelm Kempf (2012) considers it a worthwhile concept to reform news media content, especially during times of intense conflict. Many experts (including Lynch, 2005; Siraj, 2006; Lee & Maslog; Spencer, 2006) have empirically investigated war media content and found a preponderance of war journalism, which indicates that existing media practices are predominantly slanted towards war journalism.

### 1.3 Effects of media: synergies for peace

While peace journalists share a serious concern that war-oriented media tend to escalate conflicts, those with expertise in traditional media research see these observations as naïve and not supported by empirical investigations (Hanitzch, 2007). In fact, *media effects* have been a perennial topic of debate in media studies since the start of the twentieth century. Before discussing the effects of pro-war or pro-peace media on the state of conflicts, which according to Bratic (2006) can be helpful to develop strategies for peace media, it is essential to discuss briefly the five paradigms in communication effects studies identified by theorists Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis (2006). The first era of media theory concentrated on the powerful effects of mass media. It was thought that media were able to initiate social disruption and bring about unwanted changes in society. Media were considered to be very convenient tools for supporting war, although there was a recognition that they could be used for peaceful purposes (Lasswell, 1927; Lipmann, 1922). The second era saw efforts to empirically demonstrate the actual effects of mass media, as experts rejected the unwarranted claims of the powerful effects paradigm. New scientific approaches were adopted to study the influence of mass media on people's attitudes and behavior (Lazarsfeld, 1944). Media effects proved to be minimal when empirically tested, and that led to the third era of media theory, which saw the rise of the *limited effects* paradigm. Study after study conducted after the Second World War supported the limited effects paradigm, barring a few minor studies that seemed to confirm the mass society theory (Baran & Davis, 2006; Lowery & Defleur, 1994). During the 1970s and 1980s, a European cultural perspective was introduced in America that often clashed with the American empirical approach to the social sciences, and thereby a new *cultural* perspective on communication emerged. This is characteristic of the fourth era of mass media studies. Neo-Marxist and British Cultural Studies perspectives were adopted by many communication experts to study the effects of mass media, like the Frankfurt School, the political economy of the media, and the social construction of everyday life. Media were being seen as an important element of culture that promoted the interests of powerful elites in maintaining the status quo. Findings from these studies, combined with developments in communication technology, heralded the current 5<sup>th</sup> era of media theory, characterized by the *moderate-effects* perspective (framing theories, globalization of communication, media literacy movements).

Media effects can be described as a causal linkage between media content and desired behavioral change (Baran & Davis, 2006). Attempts have been made to integrate more than a dozen theories into a single approach to mass media effects,

but with little success. The same problem persists in all social sciences where no single theory can completely explain a social phenomenon. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the field of mass communication has not been investigated. In fact, we know a fair amount about the process of mass communication (Severin & Tankard, 1992), and the phrase 'it depends' tells us little. Media effects can be identified, if other social variables can be found and their linkages specified. Communication experts (Baran & Davis, 2006; Severin & Tankard, 1992) and other scholars have attempted to synergize their efforts to precisely explain communication phenomena. In this regard, to reduce the confusion, two perspectives have emerged in mass communication theory. The first is the *communication science* that combines all the empirical research and theories, and the second is the *social semiotic* theory that combines all the cultural and critical theories. Further efforts are being made to integrate these two perspectives along with new trends like the new forms of communication technology, globalization of communication and new scientific discoveries intended to unravel the mysteries of human attitudes and behavior. Research in the past nine decades shows us that media contents influence audiences, and it can be said with a fair amount of confidence that war media or peace media can exacerbate conflict or help to resolve conflict, 'depending on different variables'. Neither can supposed magical media effects be accepted in *toto*, nor does the negligible effects model offer a completely accurate description (Severin & Tankard; 1992).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Framing theory**

The theoretical framework of this study is determined by framing theory, which according to scholars (for instance Lee, 2010; Siraj, 2008) supports peace journalism. Frames are mental structures that organize our thoughts and ideas to make the social order comprehensible for us. According to Entman (1993), although often applied unconsciously, frames are the most powerful tools available with which to know and interpret reality. Frames imply inferences, with each frame pointing to different approaches. So, he suggests that framing theory refers to the selection of a portion of reality, prioritizing it over others and associating these with lexicons to portend a specific reality. Utilizing this theory will help us to identify certain dimensions and approaches that are usually adopted by media practitioners when covering conflicts. These include ideological, professional and endogenous factors. This study will reveal the dominant perspectives used by Pakistani media to grasp the Taliban conflict. It will discuss how war-supporting and peaceful messages are framed and interpreted and what needs to be done to achieve constructive conflict coverage.

### **2.2 Research questions:**

The following three questions are posed in the study to discuss the media reporting of the Taliban conflict.

R.Q.1: How do Pakistani media frame the Taliban conflict?

This question will address the framing strategies with which the conflict is covered, who gets the most attention, and who gets the least.

R.Q.2: How do the victims in the conflict perceive media reporting?

This question will address how the perspectives of ordinary people living in tribal areas (who are the hardest-hit victims) are represented. Further, I will explore how these severely affected people see media coverage and seek suggestions from them for more constructive conflict coverage.

R.Q.3: What are the issues that obstruct successful peace journalism when reporting on this conflict?

This query will identify the hindrances to peace journalism and also help us devise a corrective strategy.

## **3. Research methodology**

This study offers a qualitative analysis of Taliban conflict reporting in Pakistan's two prestige English-language newspapers; the daily *News* and *Dawn*. As these two newspapers are published in different editions, I selected the Islamabad/Rawalpindi editions for two reasons. First, because these editions are published in the national capital, they have more impact, and secondly, the geographical contiguity of this area to the conflict-ridden tribal areas of Pakistan. The two newspapers were analyzed from May 2013 to July 2013, which yielded a total of 80 news stories. In the first stage, all these stories were analyzed and the major themes and slants identified. In the second stage, for a more intensive analysis, I excluded all the one-column reports and stories published on the inside pages, which reduced the total number of news reports to 38. I used a textual analysis technique (discourse analysis) to analyze the media content. *Though many scholars* have used the discourse analysis technique to study media texts (Ottosen, 2010; Ross, 2006), this methodology draws on the work of Van Dijk. Van Dijk (1998) does not exclusively focus on linguistics (unlike Fairclough and Wodak) but rather connects it with the macro-aspects of social and political contexts, to decipher the underlying notions of ideology and power (1998) in media

texts. Being myself a native of the tribal areas and aware of the whole range of issues that determine the behaviors of stakeholders and the events occurring in this conflict, I believe the Van Dijk approach is the most appropriate for this project. Moreover, the Van Dijk (1998) approach is media-centric, due to its emphasis on news headlines and intros which characterize the whole perspective. Moreover, the analysis was conducted while keeping in view Galtung's war and peace journalism model and the constructive and destructive coverage models developed by Wilhelm Kempf. It must be remembered that the researcher only applied the first strand of discourse, which is related to the third strand of social analysis (like other proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis, Van Dijk also calls for a three-tiered analysis, consisting of discourse, socio-cognition, and social analysis).

Additionally, to gain a thorough understanding of the conflict, the researcher visited the Khyber Agency (a tribal area severely impacted by this conflict) and talked to local people. Being myself a native of the restive province of Khyber Pakhtoonhwa, it was somewhat less risky for me to visit these areas. People from other parts of Pakistan usually hesitate to visit these areas, due to prevailing lawlessness and insurgency. Even so, many distrusted my motives in enquiring into the details of the conflict. I was cognizant of this and coordinated the trip well in advance, hoping thereby to avoid dangerous incidents.

#### **4. Research findings**

After a somewhat generic analysis of 80 news stories and a further intensive analysis of 38 leading news stories (the texts were read four times) on the Taliban conflict, a valuable data set became available which can be presented in addressing the three research questions.

##### **4.1 R.Q.1: How do Pakistani media frame the Taliban conflict?**

Judging from the war and peace journalism perspectives, the media discourse was highly permeated by war journalism considerations. The two newspapers applied almost the same discursive techniques to report on the conflict. The three major frames that were identified by the researcher after intensive reading of the texts are (1) Taliban as the enemy (2) Pakistani army as the rescuer and (3) force as the means to find a solution. The following discussion presents citations of a few news stories (which are dramatic and provocative), and the rest of the articles are summarized to support the main argument. Following the Van Dijk approach, the cited news articles contained the key themes in the headlines and intros, which are the most important parts of any news story.

##### **4.1.1 Taliban as the enemy**

The two newspapers were categorical in framing the Taliban as the enemy. Within this category of 'enemy', further discourse techniques used by the media are: firstly, they were reported as the 'anti-state elements who harbor devilish designs of creating anarchy and disruption in the country' (*Dawn*, July 30, 2013). They are framed as 'agents of chaos and the ones who thrive on crisis' (*The News*, June 1, 2013). The same articles accuse the Taliban of colluding with the country's enemies to commit atrocities against ordinary civilians. This enemy image has led many reporters and editors to regard the Taliban as a single, monolithic entity, which is a misperception of the reality. The country's prime minister has reiterated many times that the Taliban are not a single group, for many hostile factions are using this label for their activities. Any constructive debate on the media has to delve into the details of this issue and uncover the facts of this murky scenario.

Other stories declared them to be against peace, because it does not matter to them. Citing examples, the media claimed that making peace with the Taliban would be dangerous for Pakistan and criticized those who distinguished between 'Pakistanis' and 'us'. In fact, a new term, 'pro-Taliban', has been used by those who call for peace agreements. They are hated for taking such a stance and criticized for allowing a terrorist group to be mainstreamed and become part of a 'national narrative'. The Taliban way of doing things is the antithesis of peace and stability, the reports asserted (assumed), as though there were no tensions and conflicts in the region before the Taliban movement. In fact, the areas of Pakistan afflicted by the present struggle have never known peace in any ordinary sense of the word (Rashid, 2001). The tribal areas of Pakistan (North-West Frontier Province) were always a neglected region and ruled by a long-time colonial regime, the FCR (Frontier Crimes Regulations). This inhumane and inequitable environment is the root cause of Talibanization and many other anti-statist movements, which is conveniently ignored by the media.

The second technique applied in the same category is that of treating the Taliban as 'responsible for the killings of innocent people'. Though the human toll in the conflict is horrific and beyond imagination, other forces, including the Pakistani army, black marketers, smugglers, sectarian groups, the Blackwater PMC, the intelligence agencies of regional states and the drone attacks have contributed to the bloodbaths (Khan, 2013). Strangely, the media do not delve deeply into these issues and solely criticize the Taliban for the killings, assigning them all the responsibility. 'Peace is not possible with killers', the

*News* (June 14, 2013), reported the former Pakistani interior minister Rehman Malik, who also warned of the 'unbearable consequences of a peace deal with these terrorists'. The report asserts that the Taliban cannot be trusted and hence military operations are the only solution. The same line is toed by *Dawn* (May 19, 2013), which reported a retired Pakistani military official as saying it is tantamount to accepting defeat from the people who have killed thousands of Pakistanis and military personnel. Though the media, when reporting on government officials, always refer to the 'ordinary people killed in the conflict', they never discuss what happens to the local population when military jets bomb the area and fire missiles. Similarly, the killings that occur in the drone attacks are never presented before the camera, and journalists pay little attention to the victims. Over the course of many months, Pakistani media have had to retract their reports on many occasions when they blamed the Taliban for particular bombing incidents that would later turn out to be the work of other groups.

Thirdly, Taliban fighters are framed as enemy insurgents who pose a major threat to national security and the country's territorial integrity. They allegedly have 'territorial ambitions' and want to expand their activities over the length and breadth of the country (*Dawn*, May 22, 2013). The *News* (July 31, 2013) warned that if they were not stopped, they would soon 'be controlling the heartland', as once happened when they captured Swat teams and advanced to just 70 kilometers from Islamabad. Other accounts described the same situation using different discursive patterns to mobilize support against the 'grave dangers' that Talibanization posed to the country. The media reported officials as saying that the only way out was 'force'. Readers were warned that if the Taliban were not stopped at this moment, other anti-state groups would be emboldened that are operating in different regions and can do irreparable harm to the country.

Finally, they are framed as agents of repression, retrogression, medievalism and backwardness (The *News*, August 7, & *Dawn*, July 30), with the aim to impose their rigid worldviews on 'moderate Pakistanis'. Their rise to power would mean that Pakistan could not remain a democracy and would be reduced to a theocracy where just one religious sect dominates and others are forbidden to practice their faith. In other stories both newspapers criticized the Taliban way of life as based on barbaric traditions, where intolerance and schism rule supreme, where men are forced to grow beards and women to wear traditional costumes, much to the chagrin of the broader population. Not a single story appeared in the Pakistan media to discuss the local culture, which would definitely suggest that the attire and traditions of the Taliban are not different, and in fact the same garb has been worn in the region for centuries. The customs and traditions of tribal peoples living on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been different from those of the mainstream culture, and they are consequently often ridiculed and stereotyped in social discourse.

#### 4.2.2 Pakistani army as the rescuer

While Pakistani media usually disdain the army for its political role, they are all appreciative of this institution for playing a 'crucial role to weaken and even defeat the Taliban' (*News*, May 6, 2013) and rescue the country from their nefarious clutches (*Dawn*, May 23, 2013). These and other examples openly side with the Pakistani military and eulogize their sacrifices. They are often framed as *Jawan* (strong men) who are honored for their commitment to and love of this country and revered if they embrace martyrdom. All the stories analyzed in this category share the same frames when reporting on the Pakistani army. In all accounts, the military is 'acclaimed' for its services and the Taliban 'disclaimed' for their malevolent designs. Different opinion surveys conducted in Pakistan have revealed that though the Taliban have no solid majority of supporters when it comes to fighting against the Pakistani army, they are still considered Pakistanis, and peace is preferred to force as the right way to deal with this issue.

As most journalists have no access to these areas, they usually rely on the press releases issued by the Pakistani military. These are published without any changes in the stated facts and vocabulary. The two newspapers haven't published a single story where the army's role could be challenged. In Pakistani society, however, the army's role *is* being questioned: 'Why are the Taliban winning, how do the Taliban orchestrate attacks, why are the drone attacks being made on us, why are those killed in tribal areas not shown in the media', and so on. The media turned against the peace deal with the Taliban when a military official was killed, questioning why 'we need to talk to people who are killing our Jawans'. When army personnel are killed in attacks, the media sympathize with the bereaved families, showcasing their lives, services and sacrifices to generate maximum support for the cause of fighting against the Taliban.

#### 4.2.3. Force as the solution

The third discourse technique used by the media while covering this conflict is to stress 'force as the solution to this conflict'. 'It is foolhardy to expect religious fanatics to eschew violence' (*News*, June 8, 2013), or 'Does it make sense to deal with ragtag militias who have killed more than forty thousand Pakistanis?' (*Dawn*, June, 13 2013). By selecting half-truths from the Swat example, the newspapers stress military operations as the only effective option. Though at present Pakistani media are against the drone attacks on the country's soil, earlier they were reported to be successful in killing terrorists (who often turned out to be ordinary civilians). In other news stories, the media reported extensively on past peace agreements and blamed the Taliban for violations. They were criticized for having a much more extensive agenda, (The *News*, August

23, 2013) to promote Talibanization and increase their influence in the settled areas of Khyber Pakhtoonhwa (the war-ravaged province of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan) and in the Pakistani heartland. The *Dawn* (May 27, 2013) reported that the Pakistani Taliban have an identical agenda with the Afghan Taliban, to spread their ideology and seize power over this country by hook or by crook. Referring to past examples when peace agreements were signed between the two sides, the newspaper concludes that these peace overtures have emboldened the Taliban and given them much needed space and time to regroup and reorganize. The newspapers do not check their facts against other sources to provide alternative viewpoints. As the common people in this conflict have no voice in the media, these elitist and securitized versions have a monopoly in mainstream media discourse. This is in line with the findings of many other studies (Ross, 2008; Ersoy, 2006) investigating the nature of the media in wars, where they lose any sense of proportion, siding with one group or another, inciting more violence and advocating 'force as the solution'.

#### **4.3 R.Q.2: How do the victims of the conflict perceive media reporting?**

Though the Pakistani media take pride in informing people about all the important issues, while covering this conflict they conveniently ignore issues that are of paramount importance and would help people form educated opinions. On my trip to one of the afflicted areas, I listened to people who were totally dismissive of what was being claimed by the media and the 'absurd questions' that media representatives asked (I was snubbed by a tribesman when I tried to ask the traditional question of 'who is winning'). Almost all the people I interviewed decried media reporting for not highlighting their concerns, their lives in refugee camps, their nostalgia for their lost homes, the rigors of refugee life, the bombardments by the army, the retaliations by Taliban fighters, the destruction of their houses and properties, and sorrow over the dear ones killed in the conflict, the trauma and psychological stress and the travails of survivors. Leaving homes and taking refuge in camps is considered unmanly in tribal tradition, but they are told that they have to do it for the sake of their women and children. They were worried about their cattle and local businesses destroyed in this war. They accused the media of neglecting them and hiding the truth by not revealing "who was doing all this in their areas." They accused the media of portraying their women and children as beggars, fighting over food and complained that they captured them on camera unawares. They said that they were the victims of the conflict, but the media were depicting them as fleeing in search of free food. Mohammad Bilal, a literate tribesman in the Khyber Agency, expressed his reaction like this: "Each time I read a newspaper or listen to a radio or television show, we are told that so many people are killed, and there are conflicting statements by the government and the Taliban. Where are we? It is as if the whole conflict is being fought for our land and not for us." Another tribesman, Zarkhan Khan, said, "I have never seen a reporter here. I don't know where are they are getting their news." The same views were expressed by teachers in a school, who said that the media never discussed the causes of the conflict and solutions for it. "They like our bleeding faces and bodies," said one teacher, when asked why they were being ignored in the media debate. A merchant who regularly watches TV and reads newspapers said, "I simply laugh at the baseless arguments of reporters appearing on TV and claiming expertise on issues which they know little about."

Research studies (Knightly, 2003; Ross, 2008) have shown that the media usually highlight the policymakers, military officers and other elites in the conflict, because professionally they are said to be accurate, objective and more newsworthy. Ordinary people are ignored, as they provide less interesting news. However, the protagonists of the peace media (Galtung, 2000; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Kempf, 2007) propose that by including the human interest stories of affected people and eye-witness accounts, peace stories can be made as newsworthy as militant ones, and will ultimately encourage a peaceful conflict settlement.

#### **4.4 What are the issues that obstruct peace journalism when reporting on this conflict?**

One key factor that slants media discourse towards war journalism is the dominant belief in media circles that 'the Taliban want to break Pakistan', which promotes an enemy image. They are criticized for what they do and even condemned for what they don't do. The past ten years have sown seeds of hatred and bellicosity, which are hard to forget. But force is not the solution. The government has confirmed that more than 50,000 people have lost their lives in this conflict. Military operations could quadruple this figure, alongside the enormous damage to the whole body politic of Pakistan. The army has told the government that the chances for winning this war are not more than 10 percent. In this scenario, peace diplomacy needs to be initiated, and the onus lies on the media. However, the Pakistani media offer only a one-sided perspective on this conflict, which further aggravates the situation. Now, after ten years of this conflict in which thousands of military personnel, Taliban fighters and ordinary people have been killed, media discourse still does not favor the idea of peace. As peace scholar Gadi Wolsfeld (2004) observes, complicated conflicts need patience and perseverance and a commitment to peace, which the news media can't provide, due to inherent professional and organizational constraints. Now, the government has agreed to a peace settlement with the Taliban, who are being criticized for giving in to them. The Pakistani media do not discuss the conspiracies and interests of different stakeholders, who are hell-bent on making these peace agreements fail.

Secondly, journalists have virtually no access to the conflict regions and are solely dependent on the army for whatever information they get on them. Some journalists claim to have sources in the Taliban, but these claims are refuted by independent scholars. If the military, aided by the world's best intelligence from the CIA, cannot find the Taliban, how is it possible for ordinary journalists to have contacts in the Taliban fold?

The most horrific aspect of war journalism is the ignorance of 'people's accounts' in media discourse. It seems that news editors don't consider it newsworthy to discuss the plight of ordinary tribesmen. For them, the statements of the top Pakistani policymakers and the Taliban leaders (although no one can confirm the authenticity of the purported media talks with the Taliban) and alleged atrocities are more important, as they engage people emotionally and psychologically more than the concerns of ordinary people, which are considered mere repetition and hence as having no news value (Ottosen, 2008). Media personnel will have to be convinced of the importance of publishing the personal accounts of the affected people. Such an approach will be in line with peace journalism and also provide significant information on how to approach the conflict from a more constructive perspective (Kempf, 2007).

One main problem with the current journalistic practices is the framing by the Pakistani media of all Taliban as constituting just a single collective entity. This is simply not true, as shown by many independent scholars and analysts. The provincial government has stated many times that there are about 40 different groups within the Taliban fold. By now, it has become almost a joke in Pakistan that if an explosion occurs anywhere in the country, the Taliban are blamed. Many times a gas explosion, electrical power failure or any other infrastructure breakdown is first blamed on the Taliban, on red tickertape, and then the tickertape turns blue, showing it was caused by human error or a technical breakdown. Media need to sensitize the Pakistani people and policymakers to why eight million people (the total population of the tribal areas) despise government policy, e.g., for the alliance with the USA. Why are young people committing suicide and killing innocent countrymen? Democracies are expected to comply with the will of the people, and policies should be changed if the people desire this. At this moment, however, Pakistani media are lapdogs of the Western-leaning media houses (USAID is the major supporter of the Pakistani media) trying to agitate for this war, in which ordinary tribesmen are the hardest hit victims.

## 5. Conclusion

This study was made during a period of widespread political and social upheaval. Twelve years after the 9/11 attacks, America and its allies have realized the futility of force and are pursuing peace talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan, whose government came under strong pressure for 'providing safe havens to Al Qaeda'. The Afghan Taliban have opened an office in Doha, and talks are underway to include them in a political dispensation in Afghanistan when the US withdraws its forces from the region sometime next year. Interestingly, the same mechanism is being used by Pakistan to arrive at some form of peace agreement with the Pakistani Taliban, but unlike Afghanistan, there is resistance to signing peace agreements within and outside of Pakistan. This study was designed to address the 'why' and 'how' of this problem, and primarily investigated the content of Pakistani media, along with seeking the viewpoints of affected people in this conflict. It must be kept in mind that alongside the peace model of the USA in Afghanistan, the desire to peacefully resolve the Taliban conflict in Pakistan was strongly advocated by the Pakistani Tehreek-e-Insaf Party, headed by the popular Pakistan sports celebrity Imran Khan. He contested the 2013 elections in Pakistan by pledging to resolve this issue peacefully and won a landslide majority in the province of Khyber Pakhtoonhwa, the epicenter of conflict. Though he is otherwise considered a 'darling of Pakistani media', the peace proposals made by Imran Khan are not welcomed by the Pakistani media, the Western-backed civil society and the elite intelligentsia.

This study posed three important questions to help understand the media framing of the conflict: the representation of the Taliban, the viewpoint of the affected people and the possibilities for peace journalism to help ameliorate the situation. Regarding the first question, the Pakistani media discursive strategies blamed the Taliban for the violence against 'our army', having territorial ambitions, advocating a narrow strand of Islam that opposes modernity and would leave us backward and uncultured. The media completely decontextualized the conflict, never mentioned the role played by the Pakistani and Western powers in bringing about this situation, which according to peace scholarship is propagandistic and elitist (Galtung, 2000; Lynch 2005). Such media framing is dangerous to peace (Kempf, 2003) and would obfuscate the conflict and complicate its resolution (Bläsi, 2004). This negative framing of the Taliban corresponds with the media anxiety for peace (Wolsfeld, 2004). Ironically, the media treat all the Taliban as just one group, in order to oversimplify the situation (which fits the journalistic cliché 'Keep it simple, stupid') and conveniently ignores the exhortations by politicians like Imran Khan that the Taliban is not a monolithic entity. Peace agreements with them will reveal the true intentions of those who are not signing the deals. Moreover, the peacemakers believe that if the Taliban set up their office in Islamabad, it will be easy to question them and hold them responsible if any terrorist outrage occurs. Unfortunately, Pakistani media deride these arguments, presenting unconvincing reasons to justify their position. One reason for such slanted media coverage may be the editorial guidelines that they receive from Islamabad-based editors and managers, who have no direct exposure to this conflict and entertain elitist notions which, according to Bläsi (2004), make it a major hurdle for the media to promote peace.



The second question addressed why the media ignored the victims of this conflict by not reporting on their concerns and perspectives. Judging by the standards of traditional journalism, the media neglect the common people because elitist views are more newsworthy and have greater impacts. Official statements meet the professional standards of journalism and hence get the biggest headlines. Additionally, sometimes discussing the plight of the common people may go against the national consensus (criticism of the army for excessive use of force). This researcher was told by victims in the Khyber Agency that the media were misreporting them and highlighting issues that were of secondary importance. In the words of an affected person, the media "take pleasure in watching our bleeding faces."

Finally, on the question of discussing the scope of peace journalism to help resolve this conflict, the obstacles identified ranged from elitist perspectives, lack of basic knowledge about this conflict, fears of seeming unpatriotic, the simplification of issues, the dangers of fundamentalism, the inaccessibility of the areas where this war is being fought and a lack of knowledge about the benefits of peace media. The scope of peace journalism lies in highlighting the suffering of ordinary people, which can be both newsworthy (due to human interest) and a guide for peace. No one can deny that the agony and tribulations of the victims and their proposals should carry more weight. Additionally, peace journalism can rightly spotlight the wrongs in policies that were implemented by Pakistani leaders a decade ago in siding with the USA against their national interests. The Taliban's demands for withdrawing from the US war effort fits perfectly with our own national interests (always stressed by the provincial government of the region where this war is being waged). Media need to analyze these demands from a Pakistani perspective and encourage other stakeholders to work for enduring peace in the region.

### *References*

- Baran, S. & Davis, D. (2006). *Mass communication theories and approaches*, Belmont, CV: Wordworth.
- Bläsi, B. (2004). Peace Journalism and the News Production Process. *Conflict & communication online* 3(1&2).
- Bratic, V. (2006). Media effects during violent conflicts: Evaluating media contribution to peace building. *Conflict & communication online* 5(1).
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing. Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 51-58.
- Ersoy, M. (2010). Peace journalism and news coverage on the Cyprus conflict. *The Muslim World* 100(1).
- Fawcett, L. (2002). Why peace journalism isn't news. *Journalism Studies* 3(2).
- Galtung, J. & Lynch, J. (2010). *Reporting Conflict: New Directions in Peace Journalism*. Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Galtung, J. (2000). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. London: Sage.
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Situating peace journalism in journalism studies: A critical appraisal. *Conflict & communication online* 6(2).
- Hovland, J. I. & Kelley, H. (1953). *Communication and persuasion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hussain, S. & Siraj, S.A. (2012). War media galore. *Global Media Journal, Pakistan Edition* 5(1).
- Hussain, S. (2011): Peace journalism in Pakistan: Perspective on Taliban conflict. Transcend Media Service.  
URL: <http://www.transcend.org/tms/2011/04/>
- Lasswell, H. (1927). *Propaganda technique in the World War*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Lazarsfeld P., Berelson B. & Gaudet H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.
- Lee, S.T. & Maslog, C.C. (2005). War or peace journalism? Asian newspaper coverage of conflicts. *Journal of Communication* 55(2), 311-329.
- Lippmann, W. (1942). *Public opinion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lowery, S., & DeFleur, M. (1995). *Milestones in mass communication research*. New York: Longman.
- Lynch, J & A. McGoldrick (2005). *Peace Journalism*. London: Hawthorne Press.
- Lynch, J. (2008). *Debates in Peace Journalism*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- Kempf, W. (2003). *Constructive conflict coverage. A social psychological approach*. Edited by the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Berlin: regener.
- Kempf, W. (2007). Peace journalism: A tightrope walk between advocacy journalism and constructive conflict coverage. *Conflict & communication online* 6(2).
- Klapper, J.T. (1960). *The effects of mass communication*, Glencoe: The Free Press.
- Kovarik, B. (2007). Journalism that gives peace a chance. URL: <http://www.radford.edu/~wkovarik/misc/blog/5journalism.peace2.html> (retrieved 06-16-2013).

- Musharraf, P. (2006). In the line of fire. London: Simon & Schuster Ltd.
- Ottosen, R. (2008). Video games as war propaganda: Can peace journalism offer an alternative approach? *Peace and Policy* 13, 73-86.
- Rashid, A. (2001). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Ross, S. D. (2006). (De)constructing conflict: A focused review of war and peace journalism. *Conflict & communication online* 5(2).
- Severin, W. & Tankard, J. (1992). *Communication theories: Origins, methods, and uses in the mass media*. New York: Longman.
- Siraj, A. (2006). Image of Pakistan in the US media. URL: [http://eprints.hec.gov.pk/3773/1/Final\\_Report.pdf](http://eprints.hec.gov.pk/3773/1/Final_Report.pdf)
- Spencer, G. (2005). *The media and peace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Tehrani, M. (2002). Peace journalism: Negotiating global media ethics. *Harvard International Journal of Press* 7(2), 58-83.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1988). *News as discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2004). *Media and the path to peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*On the author:* Shabbir Hussain comes from the tribal areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, where this war on terror is being fought. He started his professional career as a newspaper reporter and then joined the country's main public sector television station. After working as a documentary producer for five years, he went into university teaching, and at present he is an Assistant Professor at Riphah University, Islamabad. He recently defended his PhD dissertation on "Conflicts and Media in Pakistan". His main research areas are: conflict communication, peace through visual media and philosophy of communication. Shabbir Hussain is the first to have introduced conflict communication as a topic in Pakistan and has organized more than a dozen seminars and workshops for media theorists and practitioners in this regard.

*Address:* Riphah International University, Al Mizan Campus, Peshawar Road, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.  
eMail: [shabbir.hussain@riphah.edu.pk](mailto:shabbir.hussain@riphah.edu.pk), [shasain2@gmail.com](mailto:shasain2@gmail.com)  
URL: <http://www.riphah.edu.pk/faculties/media-studies>