

DOCTORAL THESIS

News violence and desensitization of news viewers in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Television has become the primary ‘story teller’ in our society today (Gerbner, et.al., 1986, 1994). It is an all pervasive technology that most of us aren’t even aware of in our surroundings. From airports, bus terminals, restaurants, bars to our own lounges, television is constantly passing on its message to its audience. Its role might vary from just a background noise to active information source, its presence remains constant. However television itself is not static, it is a dynamic medium with a constantly growing presence in our lives. Therefore, there remains a constant need to understand the role television plays in shaping our ‘stories’ and the current study is a short step towards understanding the role and impact of news media on the emotional responses of news viewers in Pakistan.

During the last decade there has been an exponential growth in Pakistan’s private media industry. Over 80 channels have already started with a number in the pipeline. Of these channels the most prominent are the 16 24-hour news channels which, for the first time, provided the Pakistani public multiple options for seeking news and information (previously only Pakistan Television, a state owned channel was available) – the Pakistani public is now spoiled for choice. However this growth in the media industry also resulted in the over-exposure of issues as the channels vied for viewers. Consequently the audience is regularly exposed to sensational news and content – with coverage ranging from the graphic to the mundane – as networks compete for ratings.

Observing the media’s behavior and keeping media effects research on exposure to violence in mind, the researcher was interested in seeing whether regular exposure to violence news and violent acts leads to desensitization of the audience.

The relationship between news and sensationalism is an old one, starting from the early tabloids in the early 1900s which focused on crime/violence to attract readers. The same trend can be seen in news channels in Pakistan and abroad. One main reason can be the low cost of covering and reporting a crime or act of violence. The event itself provides the reporter with images and information (no digging required!), the drama of the crisis, its aftermath and consequences provide news channels easy fodder for their news mill which needs to run 24-hours, 365 days of the year.

Therefore the aim of the present research was twofold: one, to evaluate the amount of violence/violent content that is being shown on Pakistani news channels; and two, to try and assess the impact of this content on the emotional responses of news viewers. The study also aimed to extend the desensitization hypothesis by arguing that the continued presence of the stimulus responsible for desensitization will result in audiences’ crossing the attention threshold; i.e. viewers will ignore the central issues on the media agenda and remove it from their socio-political discussions. The model further suggested that viewers will focus more on the peripheral issues rather than the primary issues in the media agenda.

The results of the content analysis clearly show that in both public and private television news violent content is the 2nd highest type of news being reported (with domestic politics being the highest type of news content across both channels). Two types of news on violence were studied: violence resulting in fatalities and violence without fatalities; with the first one have almost twice the volume of the latter type of news content.

The content analysis and the first part of the survey analysis provide the pre-requisite information for the attention threshold assumption. One, they confirm the continuous presence of a particular issue in news in large volume; and secondly, the survey analysis provides support for the presence of desensitization amongst the respondents. The tests run for the attention threshold assumption indicated that despite the presence of the issue of violence on the media agenda, it is no longer on the public agenda, and is not a part of the social discourse of the respondents with either their family or their friends.

The current research shows that heavy consumers of violent news content tend to significantly have pro-violence attitudes. They also tend to have lower levels of emotional empathy for victims of violence and higher levels of compassion fatigue. While these results were not statistically significant for the sample tested, the results show a consistently low mean, indicating negative trend for both the variables. The respondents were generally in favor of harsher punishments and greater state/military control of the country. Results of the current study indicate that heavy viewers of news media tend to be more desensitized to the violence in society. Their emotional responses are numbed down.

For a country like Pakistan, with a history of military intervention in domestic politics and governance, this is a matter of grave concern. Strong feelings of insecurity and mean world syndrome, fed on a steady diet of violent news programming, can further undermine faith in the political system – leading to greater acceptance (and at times active desire) of military sponsored or led control – a situation that is very troubling for Pakistan.

While the current analysis is a starting place, news content in Pakistan needs to be studied in greater depth. Future research needs to also focus on the wider range of news channels in Pakistan. This would help identify the effects of different variables like ownership, political affiliations, language and location on the content of news channels. In terms of the survey itself, a broader, more inclusive research in the rural and semi-urban areas of the country would provide better evidence of the effects of news violence on Pakistanis. And finally, a lot more in-depth and extensive research is needed before on the “attention threshold” model for it to be verified and its results generalized. If verified, the model will help future researchers identify why issues of audience concern are no longer getting the requisite attention from viewers, despite having strong media presence.

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