Impact of Political Freedom and Uncertainty Avoidance on Anonymous Source Use in Media

Abhijit Mazumdar, Park University, Missouri, USA
Bhavna Wal, Sri Ramswaroop Memorial University, India

Abstract

This research paper undertakes a quantitative study of how political freedom and uncertainty avoidance affect anonymous sourcing in political news. It undertakes a quantitative comparison of anonymous source usage in political reports between India and Pakistan. The authors studied whether there would be significant difference in anonymous source usage between Pakistan and Indian media due to Pakistan having less political and media freedom. Using the theoretical construct of uncertainty avoidance, the authors researched whether anonymous sources in Pakistani media were identified more by their rank or position in political parties than anonymous sources in Indian news stories. They also studied whether Pakistani media gave reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity more than Indian reports. The study used news stories from the *Times of India* and *Dawn* as samples. The authors found that anonymous source usage in Pakistani media was significantly higher than Indian media. The authors attributed it to lack of political freedom in Pakistan. They also found that Indian political reports identified anonymous sources with their official hierarchy significantly more than Pakistani political reports. However, Pakistani political reports gave reasons for sources seeking anonymity significantly more than Indian political reports. This was attributed to higher Uncertainty Avoidance Index in Pakistan. The authors also found that Pakistani media had a significantly higher number of anonymous sources not identified by any information related to their involvement in event or incident the sources were talking about. This was attributed to lack of political freedom.

Keywords: Anonymous sources, India, Pakistan, media, politics, *Times of India*, *Dawn*

Introduction

Journalists attribute news to sources as part of their professional routine. While most sources are identified by their names and official designation to accord credibility as well as objectivity to news stories (Zelizer, 1989), many of them are not named in news stories when journalists feel their sources would be exposed to retribution or hostile action for having supplied media organizations with critical information (Gilson, 2003). Journalists face a regular dilemma in using anonymous sources. On the one hand, using them may result in loss of credibility for journalists because people will not be able to verify news (Bell, 1991), while on the other hand, not using anonymous sources would result in important news not being published (Hoyt, 2009). Many news organizations have guidelines for using anonymous sources, for instance, the Associated Press ("Associated Press," 2013). However, many media outlets do not have established rules for using anonymous sources in news, for instance, the South African newspaper *Mail & Guardian* ("Mail & Guardian," 2010). While using anonymous sources in news reports, many media organizations, for instance, the Associated Press (2013), have made it binding on journalists to provide information about the hierarchy of the source in his profession or whether the source was in some way involved in decision making on the information attributed to him or explain reasons for the source seeking anonymity. This enhances journalistic credibility among the audience.

Allen (2008) linked journalistic credibility with transparency. However, he argues that transparency and media credibility are not always linked. Nevertheless, he urges media organizations to adopt transparency in providing news, for instance, naming sources in news reports (Allen, 2008). The use of anonymous sources denies audience the knowledge of source availability and the relation of the source with the news event about which the source has provided information to the journalist. Research has found that news reports, in which information was provided to the audience by anonymous sources, were considered less credible than those in which such unnamed sources were not used (Sternadori & Thorson, 2009). The term anonymous sources has often been used for both full and partial anonymity in academic scholarship. The term has also been used interchangeably by academics and scholars with the terms veiled sources (e.g., Culbertson, 1975), unnamed sources (e.g. Adams, 1962) and confidential sources (e.g., Strupp, 2005) in news stories.

This paper undertakes a quantitative study of how political freedom and uncertainty avoidance affect anonymous sourcing in political news. The paper compares anonymous source usage in political news between India and Pakistan because the two nations have different levels of political freedom and uncertainty avoidance. The study, using the theoretical constructs of uncertainty avoidance and political freedom, takes into account political news in Indian and Pakistani media in 2014, because both countries went through political upheaval during that period. India held national elections to elect a federal government, while Pakistan went through political unrest and terrorism in 2014.

Literature Review

Anonymous sources in news media
Political news media are heavily dependent on official sources. However, official sources at times seek anonymity while giving news to journalists. Duffy and Williams (2011) found that the use of anonymous sources in 2008 on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in the United States was similar to those in the decades before the Watergate scandal. Smith (2007) argued that people were supportive of anonymous sources being used in

a story about governmental wrongdoing, but not in news reports that mounted a personal attack on an official. Zhang (2011) found rampant use of anonymous sources in news stories in China. A study of news reports that appeared in the Chinese press between 2001 and 2010 and that turned out to be false showed that half of the news stories attributed information to only anonymous sources (Zhang, 2011).

Pjesivac and Rui (2014) found that people in the United States and China rated news stories with named sources as more credible than those stories that had only anonymous sources to provide news. Li (1998) carried out a content-analysis of the sources used in *The New York Times'* coverage of China. He argues that anonymous source usage increased during the student protests in China in 1989. He found that nearly half of the sources quoted in the stories were not identified by any kind of information. *Washington Post* associate editor Bob Woodward, known for his role in the Watergate scandal coverage, argues that it is difficult to get news using named sources from places such as the White House or Pentagon. He therefore advocates the use of anonymous sources (Shepard, 1994). In view of the fact that anonymous source usage may impact journalistic credibility, Carl Lavin, deputy managing editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, argues against the use of anonymous sources by journalists. However, he also cautions that the need to use anonymous sources must be balanced with the need to provide important news that cannot be obtained using other means to the public (Crary, 2005).

There have been instances when reports attributed to anonymous sources have later turned out to be inaccurate. For instance, *Newsweek* in 2005, broke an investigative story attributed to one, unnamed military source (Seelye & Lewis, 2005). The magazine reported that an American official at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility had shown disrespect to the Muslim holy book, the Koran. The magazine later retracted the story on the ground that the unnamed source was unsure of the news he had provided to the reporter (Seelye & Lewis, 2005). Though the story was attributed to many military sources, the editors later said that it was based on only one anonymous source (Seelye & Lewis, 2005).

Blankenburg (1992) found that between February 1990 and February 1991, words such as "sources said" or "officials said" were used in 30% of stories from the *LA Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. The use of vague descriptions of sources cited in news stories is also a matter of concern to journalists and scholars. The magazine *Newsweek's* editor-in-chief Richard M. Smith in a letter to the publication audience argued against the use of the phrase "sources said" (Kurtz, 2005). Sternadori (2007) found that between 1994 and 2002, as many as 19 percent of the anonymous sources in non-winning stories and 12 percent of the anonymous sources cited in Pulitzer and Investigative Reporters and Editors award-winning stories were veiled in a manner that one could not identify whether they were governmental sources. Little, if any, quantitative research is available on the use of anonymous sources in political news in South Asia.

Media-government relations in India and Pakistan

Pakistan came into being after the division of India in 1947. Pakistan has, at times, seen turbulent relations between its government and media. The nation has had more than 30 years of military rule alternating with democratically elected governments ("Let's start," 2016). Often Pakistani media has been subservient to the military rulers of the country through self-censorship (Younus, 2015). The country's official electronic media is owned and controlled by the federal government, while the government exercises indirect control over print media. The government influences news content by offering advertisement contracts to only those media organizations that adhere to its demands, and by offering houses and land to journalists. For

instance, the federal government offered journalists land to construct houses in order to get favorable press coverage at a time when their anti-terrorist operations were not going well. However, those journalists that do not do the federal government's bidding are often intimidated (Riaz, 2008).

Notwithstanding whether the Pakistan army is ruling the country, it continues to influence the politics of the nation (Khan, 2015). The Pakistan army has often faced allegations of illegally detaining and killing reporters who have brought out investigative stories about its wrongdoings (Jalal, 2014). For example, noted Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir had attributed an assassination attempt on him to the Inter-Services Intelligence or the ISI, which is a spying agency affiliated with the Pakistan Army ("Hamid Mir," 2014). During the military rule of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan witnessed censorship of its media through the press advice system of the military regime. Violations of rules laid out by the military government were punishable with a prison term of up to 10 years and payment of a fine ("Pakistan," 2015). Later, despite the Nawaz Sharif-led civilian government's pressure on the media to not publish news against the government, many media organizations and journalists continue writing against the government of the day ("Pakistan," 2015). There are more than 1,500 newspapers and journals published in Pakistan. The *Dawn* with a daily circulation of 675,000 copies is the largest selling English-language newspaper in the nation ("World press," 2015).

According to Freedom House ratings, the Pakistan media is not free. The ratings gave the country a press freedom score of 64 on a scale of 0-100, where 0 symbolized free media and 100 meant a country with no media freedom ("Freedom of," 2016). The Freedom House also ranked Pakistan low on political freedom. It gave the nation a score of 30 on a scale of 0-40, where a score of 0 meant a country with absolute political freedom while a score of 40 meant the country had no political freedom ("Pakistan," 2016).

While Pakistan alternated between democracy and military rule, India remained a stable democracy since it won independence in 1947 (Guha, 2009). The media in India remains largely free and has always spoken out against authoritarianism and abuse of power ("Indian media," 2015). The media in India faced restrictions briefly between 1975-77 when the nation was placed under emergency by then prime minister Indira Gandhi. The emergency was marked by press censorship and restrictions on civil rights of the people of the country. However, once the emergency was lifted the media continued to report without restrictions ("India media," 2015). The early 1990s saw economic liberalization in the country resulting in a surge of foreign investment in and growth of the India media (Chakravarty, 2003). As many as 105,443 newspapers and periodicals in 23 languages are registered with the Indian government (Dubbudu, 2015). The *Times of India* with over three million daily circulation is the most widely read English-language daily in India ("World press," 2016). Though the federal and state governments in India did not try to impose restrictions on the media, there have been cases of violent attacks on journalists for exposing governmental wrongdoings. For instance, journalist Jagendra Singh was burned alive after he published a story about a politician who had raped a woman (Pleasance, 2015). According to Freedom House ratings, the media in India is partly free ("India," 2016). It gave a press freedom score of 40 to the country on a scale of 0-100. The Freedom House also gave India a score of 20 on political freedom on a scale of 0-40, where a score of 0 meant a country with absolute political freedom, while a score of 40 meant the country had no political freedom ("India," 2016). The press freedom and political freedom scores for India reflected that there was more press and political freedom in India than in Pakistan. The press and political freedom scores lay out that there is difference on both parameters, that is, press and political freedom between India and Pakistan.

Therefore, this research becomes important because anonymous source usage may also be linked to political and press freedom. With more political and press freedom, people will be more open about their views and anonymous source usage will be less in such nations.

Hypothesis 1: Anonymous source usage in Pakistan media will be significantly higher than Indian media.

Uncertainty avoidance

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index measures the degree to which an individual can tolerate uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede based uncertainty avoidance on three features: 1) the degree to which people will flout guidelines established by their employers, 2) the degree to which people seek stability in their jobs, and 3) the frequency of people feeling uncertain or nervous at work. He also gave an uncertainty avoidance comparison between various countries.

Huo and Randall (1991) measured uncertainty avoidance between managers at workplaces in Beijing and Hong Kong in China. The Uncertainty Avoidance Index was slightly higher in Hong Kong as compared with Beijing. Wu (2008) compared leadership styles between the United States and Taiwan. He found that there was no significant difference between them. He, however, argued that university workers in both the countries had high uncertainty avoidance values. Yun (2008) studied the relation between excellence in public diplomacy and Hofstede's dimensions using data from 52 embassies in Washington DC in the United States. He found that the dimension of uncertainty avoidance had a significant association with excellence in public diplomacy initiatives of countries. He found that countries with low uncertainty avoidance scores were more accepting of excellence in public diplomacy than countries with high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Hofstede ("The Hofstede," 2015) gave India a medium-low score of 40 on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index, while Pakistan got a high uncertainty avoidance score of 70. The Uncertainty Avoidance Index gives a score between 0 and 100, where 0 means a country where uncertainty avoidance is at a minimum, while 100 symbolizes maximum uncertainty avoidance. According to Hofstede, India is a patient country where tolerance of the unexpected is much higher than Pakistan. Hofstede argues that Pakistani society is not accepting of unorthodox ideas and the Pakistani people are bound by rigid rules that are seldom flouted ("The Hofstede," 2015). In light of Hofstede's higher uncertainty avoidance score for Pakistan, it can be argued that Pakistani media would use anonymous sources in such a manner that would help bring down uncertainty levels among its audience. In doing so, they may identify anonymous sources by their official hierarchy or rank within political parties. To avoid uncertainty among the audience, Pakistani media may also give reasons for such sources to seek anonymity more than Indian media organizations.

Research Question 1: Will Pakistani political reports identify anonymous sources with their official hierarchy or rank more than Indian political reports?
Research Question 2: Will Pakistani political reports give reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity more often than Indian political reports?

Method

Samples

To study anonymous source use in political stories the English-language dailies *Dawn* in Pakistan and the *Times of India* were chosen. The *Times of India* is the most widely read English-language newspaper in India with a daily circulation of over three million ("World press," 2016). The *Dawn* is the largest selling English language newspaper in Pakistan ("World

press," 2015). The time frame of the study was between Jan. 1, 2014 and Dec. 31, 2014. The year 2014 was marked by major political developments in both India and Pakistan. India held national elections in 2014 to elect a prime minister. The elections resulted in a victory of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) whose leader Narendra Modi became the prime minister, replacing the Congress party's (Cong) Manmohan Singh from prime ministership ("Narendra Modi," 2014). For this study two Indian entities were chosen: BJP and Cong.

In 2014 Pakistan witnessed political upheaval. Allegations of rigged elections resulted in street protests against prime minister Nawaz Sharif from members of the political party Tehreek-i-Insaaf. There were allegations that the Pakistan army was inciting the protests against the civilian government to retain its control over politics in the country (Siddiqui, 2014). Also, Pakistan witnessed in 2014 a massacre of 141 school children by the terrorist outfit Taliban ("Pakistan Taliban," 2014). The political party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), is at present in power in Pakistan ("Nawaz sworn," 2013). Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is the primary opposition party in the country ("PPP's Khursheed," 2013). For the study of anonymous sources in political news in Pakistan three entities were chosen: PMLN, PPP and Pakistan army.

To obtain story samples from the *Times of India*, the authors conducted LexisNexis Academic searches with the search term BJP in the headline AND the search terms given in Appendix . Similar searches were conducted for the Congress party with the search term Cong in the headline AND the search terms given in Appendix . To obtain story samples from the *Dawn*, the authors carried out LexisNexis Academic searches with the search term PMLN in the headline AND the search terms given in Appendix . Similar searches were conducted for the Pakistan People's Party with the search term PPP in the headline AND the search terms given in Appendix . Another search was conducted with the search term army in the headline AND the search terms given in Appendix .

In all 957 stories were returned by the searches. After removing duplicates, the authors were left with 865 stories (611 from *Times of India* and 254 from *Dawn*). All types of news stories, including editorials, news reports and features were included in the study. As many as 150 stories from the *Times of India* and 120 stories from *Dawn* were randomly selected for the study.

Data analysis
A quantitative content analysis was carried out on the stories included in the sample. The unit of study was an anonymous quote. A coding sheet was developed for the analysis. Included in the coding sheet were the following items: "Number of anonymous sources?"; "Number of anonymous sources not identified by any information?"; "How many anonymous sources identified by hierarchy within party (for instance, a senior leader said)?"; "Does the story say any anonymous source wanted anonymity (for instance, a source said on condition of anonymity)?"; "If the answer is 'yes,' how many anonymous sources wanted anonymity?"; "For how many anonymous sources a reason for anonymity has been given?"

The data obtained was entered into an SPSS file and statistical analyses were carried out.

Intercoder reliability

To establish intercoder reliability, as many as 20% of the articles were independently coded. The coders had several rounds of discussions about the coding process for the study. The coders were able to resolve their differences through regular discussions about the coding process. Stories not included in the final sample were coded by the coders. Reliability coefficients in terms of Krippendorf's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorf, 2007) ranged from 0.75 to 1.00. A majority of the items reached alpha levels more than 0.90.

Results

In answer to our first hypothesis, our analysis based on independent sample t-test showed that anonymous source usage was significantly more (N= 270 df = 268 t = 4.5 $p < 0.05$) in *Dawn* political reports (mean = 5.20 SD ± 1.98) than in *Times of India* political reports (4.04 ± 1.62). Therefore, the result supported hypothesis 1.

In answer to our first research question based on independent sample t-test we found that *Times of India* political reports (1.34 ± 0.70) had a significantly higher number of anonymous sources (N = 270 df = 268 t = 2.1 $p < 0.05$) whose hierarchy in the political parties was mentioned as compared with *Dawn* political reports (1.14 ± 0.55). Therefore, Pakistani political reports did not identify anonymous sources with their official hierarchy or rank more significantly than Indian political reports.

We conducted a Pearson's chi-square test for the second research question. *Dawn* political reports (2.02 ± 0.08) gave reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity significantly more (N= 270 df = 2 $\chi 2$ = 7.80 $p < 0.05$) than *Times of India* political reports (1.90 ± 0.22). Therefore, our study found that Pakistani political reports gave reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity significantly more than Indian political reports.

Additionally, we also found that *Dawn* political reports (3.25 ± 1.84) had a significantly higher number of anonymous sources (N = 270 df = 268 t = 3.7 $p < 0.05$) that were not identified by any information about their role in the news that they were giving to journalists, for instance with phrases such as a "person involved in the decision-making process," than *Times of India* political reports (2.36 ± 1.25).

Discussion

The results supported our hypothesis that anonymous source usage was significantly higher in Pakistan media than in Indian media. We attributed it to lack of political freedom in Pakistan than in India, as laid out by the Freedom House scores on political freedom ("India," 2016). Speaking without authorization to media or publishing unfavorable stories against the Pakistan army or powerful politicians result in assassination attempts. For example, noted Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir had accused the Inter-Services Intelligence or the ISI, which is a spying outfit linked to the Pakistan Army, of an attempt on his life ("Hamid Mir," 2014). Senior leaders of political parties discourage their junior colleagues to speak to media, oftentimes threatening them with expulsion or other forms of disciplinary action. For instance, Imran Khan, the chairman of the political party Tehreek-i-Insaaf, threatened to sack leaders from his party for speaking to media-persons about the problems the party was facing (Haider, 2015).

With regard to our first research question, we found that Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* did not give significantly more details about the hierarchy or position within the party of anonymous sources as compared with *Times of India* news reports. However, we found that the Indian

newspaper *Times of India* had a significantly greater number of anonymous sources about whom their rank in the party hierarchy was given in the political reports included in the study. A possible reason for this could be that press and political freedom ("India," 2016) was more in India than in Pakistan ("Pakistan," 2016) and that journalists in India may adhere more to ethics guidelines that are, however, not binding on Indian journalists. Also, a high Uncertainty Avoidance Index of 70 given to Pakistan ("The Hofstede," 2015) may not have been a good predictor for Pakistan media to mention in political reports the hierarchy or official position of anonymous sources. According to Hofstede ("The Hofstede," 2015) Pakistani society is not accepting of unorthodox ideas and Pakistani people are bound by rigid rules that are seldom flouted. This may be another reason why despite a higher Uncertainty Avoidance Index score ("The Hofstede," 2015), Pakistan media do not have in political reports a significantly higher number of anonymous sources identified by their party hierarchy as compared with Indian media. More research, however, is needed on the effect of uncertainty avoidance on ways media identify anonymous sources in political reports.

The results to our second research question laid out that Pakistani political reports gave reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity significantly more than Indian political reports. Here the role of uncertainty avoidance on Pakistan media's portrayal of anonymous sources may come into play. Pakistan media may have in their political reports given reasons for sources seeking anonymity to convince the audience about the fear such sources faced in being identified and also to boost media credibility in the eyes of the audience. Pjesivac and Rui (2014) found that news audience based out of the United States and China considered news based only on anonymous sources as less credible than stories where journalists identified their sources. This may be a pointer to enhanced journalistic credibility if anonymous sources are identified as much as possible in news reports.

Our results also found that political reports in *Dawn* had a significantly higher number of anonymous sources about whom nothing was said about their role in the news that they were giving, for instance with phrases like "a person involved in the decision-making process," than in news reports in *Times of India*. Once again this can be attributed to lack of political freedom in Pakistan ("Pakistan," 2016) as compared with India ("India," 2016). Less political freedom in Pakistan would translate into journalists not identifying their anonymous sources, not even by their role in the decision making process for the event for which they were providing news to journalists. This research opens up scope for in-depth qualitative analysis of the role of uncertainty avoidance and political freedom in anonymous source usage by journalists. A qualitative analysis would involve in-depth interviews with journalists that was beyond the scope of the present study.

Conclusions

The authors found that anonymous source usage in political news was significantly higher in Pakistani media. This was attributed to lack of political freedom in Pakistan. The authors also found that Indian media had a significantly greater number of anonymous sources about whom their rank in the party hierarchy was given in the political reports included in the study. This may have been due to more political freedom in India that translates into more media freedom. Pakistani political reports gave reasons for anonymous sources seeking anonymity significantly more than Indian political reports. This may have been due to greater desire for uncertainty avoidance in Pakistani society. This research has importance for both political journalism given the fact that journalists tend to use anonymous sources in political news reports.

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Appendix

BJP: a source said, sources said, an insider said, a senior party leader said, a BJP leader said.
Cong: a source said, sources said, an insider said, a senior leader said, a Congress leader said.

PMLN: sources said, a source said, insider said, a senior leader said, a PMLN leader said, leader said.

PPP: sources said, a source said, insider said, a senior leader said, a PPP leader said, leader said.

Army: sources said, a source said, an insider said, an officer said, a senior officer said.

Corresponding Author: Abhijit Mazumdar
Contact Email: Abhijit.mazumdar7@gmail.com