

## **‘Media Activism and its Impacts on the Psychology of Pakistani Society’**

(Muhammad Ashraf & Muqem ul Islam)\*

### ***Abstract***

*Pakistan has one of the most vibrant media landscapes in the region. Since liberalization in 2002, the number of media outlets in Pakistan has phenomenally increased. An increasing activism in the media has emerged along with the quantitative development of media outlets. On the one hand, this media revolution has played an important role in strengthening of democratic institutions in the country. On the other hand, like the activists of any social or political revolution, the media activists also have caused tremendous collateral damage to the society. The major cause of media activism is the overriding commercial interest of the capitalist media houses. It is energizing the rat race for ratings, which coupled with the acute capacity constraints of human resource in the media, is causing a misdirected activism that relegates professional ethics to commercialism. This activism manifests itself in sensationalism in reporting of events, superficial debates, blowing trivial matters out of proportion, insensitive exposure of tragic events, graphic presentation of gory scenes, intrusion into people’s privacy and non-professional live coverage of law enforcement operations.*

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*Media activism is exerting profound impact on the different aspect of life of Pakistani people, including their psychology. On the positive side, an activist media has contributed towards an increased rights consciousness amongst the people, an increasing tolerance for difference of opinion, an understanding of the dignity of human beings, a sense of public accountability and empowerment of masses to question the performance of ruling class. On the flip side, the media activism is having a profound negative impact on the psychology of people. The excessive portrayal of violence on the television screens affects the attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of children at an impressionable age. It is also impacting the psychology of the adults by increasing aggression and violence in the society at large. Besides, excessive exposure to violence is desensitizing the society and generating an apathy towards the victims of violence. The sensationalist depiction of crime is leading to the increased copycat crime. The disproportionate negativity in the media debates is resulting in a cynically negative society. The exaggerated description of social decay is demoralizing the public. It also affects the psychology of governance in the country, as the intellectual space in Pakistan is preoccupied with sensational subjects, whereas the serious issues of economic development and policy reform are relegated in governance agenda.*

**Keywords:** *media-activism, psychology, journalism, PEMRA, television.*

## **Introduction**

Pakistani media has undergone an unprecedented expansion since liberalization in 2002. Though the print media has also evolved, the revolutionary growth has been witnessed mainly in the electronic media and the relatively newer media type called social media. The liberalization has resulted not only in quantitative increase in the number of media outlets but also an increased media activism and penetration of media in several aspects of Pakistani life. The activist media is commended, at times, as the 'only hope' for Pakistan, due to its role in mobilizing people. At other times, the activist media is condemned as being unprofessional, and for transcending the boundaries of journalism by venturing into political engagement. The media activism is resulting in accountability and policy advocacy, but is also causing an unethical breach of individual privacy and sensationalism, which in turn, is adversely affecting the psychology of people in Pakistan.

Pakistani media landscape has witnessed a revolution during the last decade, which has ushered in an increasing activism in the media. Though the role of media is occasionally debated in the intellectual circles and the media itself, the debate has usually remained limited to value judgments of media on social empowerment and spreading sensationalism and negativity. There is no attempt at studying as to 'why' the media is becoming activist, 'how' this activism is manifesting itself and 'what' positive and negative impacts it has on the psychology of Pakistani people. Though some literature has been produced on the socio-political influences of media in Pakistan, there is hardly any research on the psychological influences of media on the Pakistani society. This paper is aimed at bridging this gap.

The scope of this paper is limited to a qualitative analysis of media activism and its impact on psychology of Pakistani people. Though the study briefly refers to print media and social media also, it primarily focuses on electronic media, which has witnessed phenomenal growth during the last decade and has increasingly become activist.

The study is significant in that media is one of the most powerful influences on the way the common man perceives, interprets, responds and interacts in a media rich Pakistani society. Appreciating how this influence affects the social values and individual behaviors is vital to any attempt at ridding the society of the current widespread violence, individual stresses and aggressive behaviors. By explaining the impact of media activism on the psychology of the people of Pakistan, this study underlines the predicament emanating from the phenomenal growth of an activist media. It is also hoped that it will generate further research on the subject.

This study relies on the literature published on the subject, both in Pakistan and abroad. There is a distinct trend discernable in both the types of literature. The literature published in Pakistan emphasizes mainly the social role of media and lack of objectivity in media coverage. The international literature on media activism mostly focuses on the theoretical dimensions of media activism and positive impact of media activism on policy advocacy. Both the types of literature do not analyze the impact of media activism on the psychology of people in general, and Pakistani society in particular.

A large part of Pakistani literature on the subject is focused on the socio-political influences of mass media – media’s role as an agent of change in re-shaping public opinion, influencing public perceptions and promoting or eroding the sense of national cohesion and unity. Though there is an analysis of the socio-political influences of media activism, there is hardly any research on its psychological impact on the Pakistani society.<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistani sources, while highlighting the deleterious role of Pakistani media, stress the lack of professional ethics observed by the journalists. The essays and articles published in the print media lament the role of media anchors in diverting the attention of the public from the real issues to non-issues, sensationalizing the negative news, by blowing those out of proportion, suppressing the facts by exaggerating and misleading and advancing the political interests of the political groups by accepting bribes.<sup>2</sup>

The writers and researchers aligned with the liberal school of thought criticize the contribution of conservative media, especially the Urdu print media and news channels, in fomenting religious prejudices, promoting religious zeal and playing a “*dubious part in blurring the distinction between law and emotion in the public mind*”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Munawar Sabir, ‘Analysis of Mass Media: Influences On Socio-Political Perceptions and Stability in Pakistan,’ *Journal of Political Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012): 145.

<sup>2</sup>Shaukat Zafar, ‘Destructive Role of Media,’ *Daily Pakistan Observer*, 6 June 2013.

<sup>3</sup>ZainalAbedin, ‘Sale Value of Religious Zeal Blind Spot of Pakistan’s Media Activism,’ *South Asia Journal*, entry posted September 22, 2011, <http://southasiajournal.net/2011/09/sale-value-of-religious-zeal-blind-spot-of-pakistans-media-activism/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

The literature produced by the civil society on the subject of media activism underscores the positive impact of media activism on human development and furthering the agenda of the civil society in policy advocacy. They appreciate the role of media activism in safeguarding the communities from the harmful effects of the policies on economics, trade and environment, which may, in turn, affect the living and livelihood of people.<sup>4</sup>

Like the Pakistani literature, the international literature on media activism produced by the civil society, appreciates the role of mass media as much as it furthers their respective agenda of social change and criticizes the activism as soon as it deviates from or advocates against the particular facets of agenda advocated by social activists. For instance, the report prepared by The International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) Geneva appreciates the space created by the media activism of Jang-Group and Hindustan Time for Pak-India peace but criticizes the dominant media for ‘demonizing the human rights activists’<sup>5</sup>.

There is also significant international literature available on the theoretical side of the media activism. Such theoretical literature mainly concerns the analysis of media activism and its linkages with other social and political theories. For instance, there is literature that views the Democratic Media Activism in the light of Social

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<sup>4</sup>Journalists for Democracy and Human Rights, ‘Media Activism: Right Based Approach to Promote Development Issues,’ Journalists for Democracy and Human Rights.

<http://www.jdhr.org/publications/papers/Media%20activism-Promoting%20Development%20issues.pdf> (accessed 12 November, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, ‘Conflict, Media and Human Rights in South Asia’, *Report from a Roundtable held in Kathmandu 20-21 November 2010*, by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, (Geneva:International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2011), 6.

Movement Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory. This research establishes a two-way link between the democratization of society and the democratization of media.<sup>6</sup> However, this theoretical research also does not trace the linkage between the media activism and psychology.

Thus, there is hardly any literature published in Pakistan or abroad, which analyses the psychological impact of media activism, especially in the Pakistani context.

This paper tries to study how the media activism impacts the psychology of people in Pakistan. Accordingly, the method adopted is primarily analytical with a strong element of interpretation. There is also some quantitative component in the analysis, especially in the sections dealing with growth of media, public perceptions of media activism and impact of watching traumatic events on TV in causing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The employment of both qualitative and quantitative methods, reinforce the narrative and help interpret the trends.

### **Media Activism**

‘**Media**’ is defined as “*communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data or promotional messages are disseminated*”.<sup>7</sup> The traditional media includes the broadcasting and narrowcasting medium like television, radio, magazines, newspapers and billboards.

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<sup>6</sup>William Carroll and Robert Hackett, ‘Democratic Media Activism through the Lens of Social Movement Theory,’ *Media, Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 83-104.

<sup>7</sup>*Business Dictionary Online*, s.v. ‘Media,’ [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com) (accessed November 12, 2013).

‘**Activism**’ is referred to a more energetic, passionate, innovative, and committed action than the conventional or routine. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action, especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.”<sup>8</sup>

‘**Media Activism**’ is defined in Wikipedia as “a broad category of activism that utilizes media and communication technologies for social and political movements.”<sup>9</sup> In Pakistan, the term ‘Media Activism’ is broadly used to denote the proactive, vigorous approach adopted by the mass media to mould public opinion, influence public perceptions and promote or erode certain social values. This connotation of the term comes closer to the concepts of stalking, sensationalism and prejudice adopted by the mass media in arrogating to itself the responsibility of steering the social transformation.

- **Media Landscape in Pakistan**

Pakistan has one of the most vibrant and diverse media landscapes in South Asia. The media, to a large extent, enjoys freedom of expression despite direct and indirect pressures from Government and other political stakeholders.<sup>10</sup>

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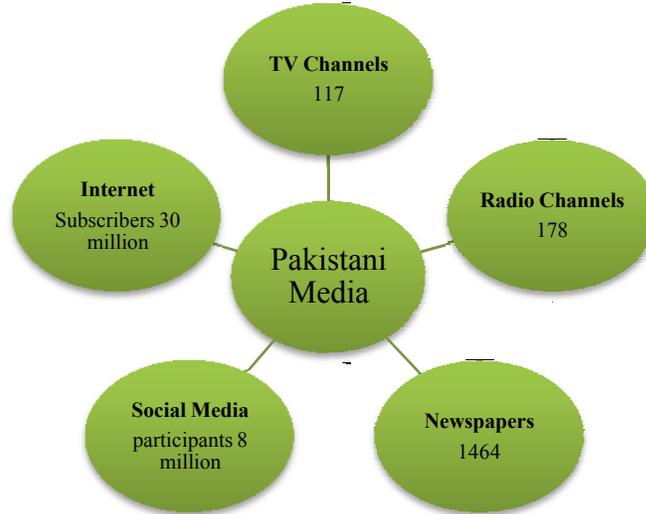
<sup>8</sup>Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. ‘Activism,’ <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (accessed November 12, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Wikipedias.v. ‘Media Activism,’ <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (accessed November 12, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>International Media Support, *Media in Pakistan: Between Radicalization and Democratization in an Unfolding Conflict* (Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2009), 14, <http://www.i-m-s.dk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-media-pakistan-radicalisation-2009.pdf> (accessed December 14, 2013).

Around 117 television channels telecast entertainment programs, news & current affairs, educational programs, films, political talk shows and satire round the clock. The television channels have a combined viewership of 124 million.<sup>11</sup>

### Pakistani Media Landscape



Besides, 138 commercial and 40 non-commercial radio channels are licensed by PEMRA.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the print media in Pakistan is diverse with hundreds of newspapers from the large national Urdu dailies to the small local vernacular papers and the English newspapers mainly, targeting the

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<sup>11</sup>Gallup Pakistan, “Media and Television Audience Measurement Cyberletter,” Gallup Pakistan, <http://www.gallup.com.pk/News/cyberletter-updated1.pdf> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, ‘FM Radio Broadcasting,’ Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, [http://www.pemra.gov.pk/pemra/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=10](http://www.pemra.gov.pk/pemra/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=10) (accessed 13 November, 2013).

opinion makers, politicians, the business community, and the upper strata of society.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the mass media, there are 30 million Internet subscribers, out of whom 8 million are part of the social media networks. More than 80% of these 'Netizens' spend more than one hour on the social media networks every day.<sup>14</sup>

- **Media Activism in Pakistan**

Theoretically, media activism is value neutral. Employed constructively, the media activism plays a vital role in flow of information, being a mirror of the society, acting as a watch-dog and advancing the work of social justice movements.

In the recent history of Pakistan, the activist media has played an effective role in the success of the socio-political movements. In the movement for restoration of judiciary, the media activism was instrumental in rallying public support. For instance, in a run up to the Long March of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2009, Geo News carried out a series of public service message campaign for restoration of the judges. The campaign proved successful in mobilizing support for the movement, culminating in the restoration of judiciary.

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<sup>13</sup>(International Media Support 2009)International Media Support, *Media in Pakistan: Between Radicalisation and Democratisation in an Unfolding Conflict* (Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2009), 14, <http://www.i-m-s.dk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-media-pakistan-radicalisation-2009.pdf> (accessed December 14, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Simon Kemp, comment on 'Social, Digital and Mobile in Pakistan,' We are social, comment posted January 16, 2013, <http://wearesocial.net/blog/2013/01/social-digital-mobile-pakistan/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

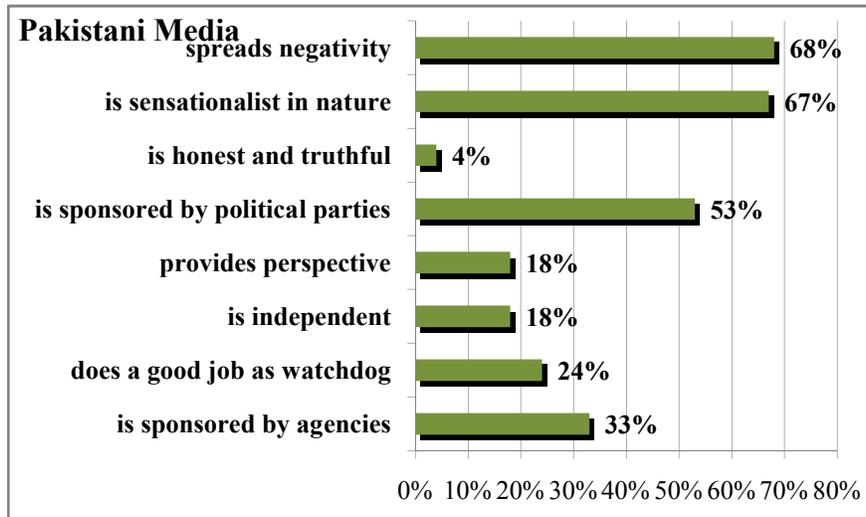
Similarly, an activist media has been instrumental in increasing transparency and accountability by exposing corruption scams in the public sector.<sup>15</sup> The media activism got a coupling effect from judicial activism as the judiciary took *suo-moto* action of several scams exposed by the activist media.

Despite exposing the mega corruption, with trails going to the top political leadership of the country and highlighting the dismal record of good governance of the political government, an activist media has been unequivocally advocating the continuation of democracy and discouraging the interference of non-political forces in the politics. Despite its positive contribution as a watch-dog, the media is blamed for sensationalism, irresponsibility, insensitivity and non-professionalism. In an online survey conducted by the Express Tribune, the results revealed that out of a sample of 1,025 Pakistanis and expatriates, 68% of respondents believed that Pakistani media spreads negativity; 67% felt that the media is sensationalist in nature and 53% thought that the media is partisan i.e. sponsored by political parties.<sup>16</sup>

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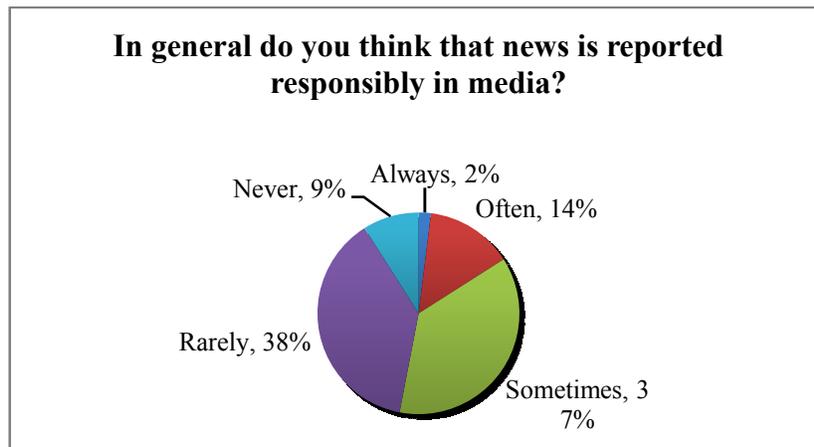
<sup>15</sup>Malik Hasnaat, 'SC Exposing Corruption of PPP Leaders Since March 2009,' *Daily Times*, 15 April, 2013.

<sup>16</sup>The Express Tribune, 'Pakistani Media is Partisan, Negative and Sensationalist,' *Express Tribune*, 9 April, 2012.



Source: The Express Tribune, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Only 2% of the respondents believed that news was always reported responsibly in Pakistan; 38% voted that news was ‘rarely’ reported responsibly in Pakistan and 9% thought that it was ‘never’ reported responsibly in Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>



Source: The Express Tribune, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The media activism is, therefore, viewed in the society as media's failure to fulfill its responsibility in remaining within the limits of legal, moral, cultural and ethical norms of the society<sup>18</sup>.

## **Media Activism in Pakistan– Causes and Manifestations**

### **1. Causes of Activism in Pakistani Media**

- **Commercialism**

The capitalist consideration is the main driving force behind the media activism. A large number of new entrants to the media market in Pakistan are purely business concerns, with the dual objectives of claiming the market share of the booming media market and acquiring the political and social influence through media. These media houses “*are just running a business and their aim is to maximize profits. They only show news or write news which would sell and would allow them to earn huge profits*”.<sup>19</sup>

The commercial considerations trigger off the rat race for ratings. Rating is not a trophy that media houses seek, simply for the sake of having it rather, it is the basic determinant of making money. “*The higher the ratings, the more subscription and advertising revenue, a media group is able to accumulate*.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Shamshad Ahmad, ‘Media Power and Responsibility’, *Daily The Nation*, 14 November, 2013.

<sup>19</sup>Atif Saeed, ‘Role of Media in Pakistan,’ Young Journalists, <http://www.youngjournalist.pk/pakistan/role-of-media-in-pakistan/#sthash.u8czn9ky.XiAoqJHH.dpbs> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

<sup>20</sup>Pakistan Media Watch, ‘Sensationalism and Ratings – Who Is Responsible?’ Pakistan Media Watch, <http://pakistanmediawatch.com/2011/12/25/sensationalism-and-ratings-who-is-responsible/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

In a commercially competitive environment in the media market, commercial interests have become paramount and quality journalism has given way to sensationalism. In order to attract more viewership and consequently more commercials, the damage caused to society is relegated. *“When you make it as a product and sell it in market, then, all vendors will compete to get best selling products. It is more of business perspective that is followed to sell and to make money. Who cares about ethics, rules or CoC [Code of Conduct]. Reporters will try bring in anything that channel can sell”*.<sup>21</sup>

**b. Social/Market Demand**

If the activist media sells sensationalism, then, who is the buyer? It is the society. So, sensationalism at the cost of professionalism, frivolous news at the cost of analytical reporting, the coverage of scams at the cost of hardcore business, economic and financial news are, indeed, demand driven.

The news reporter enters into the rat race for breaking news, because the breaking news brings viewership to the channel. The news anchor kicks up controversy and triggers superficial cock-fight amongst the politicians in talk shows, because it increases rating of the programs. This demand driven production of media pieces has gone as far as the religious programs. *“During the holy month of Ramadan, channel owners and advertisers try to cash in on*

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<sup>21</sup>J J Khan, comment on ‘Terrorism and the Role of Media,’ Pakistan Politics Discuss Forum, comment posted October 21, 2009, <http://pkpolitics.com/discuss/topic/terrorism-and-the-role-of-media> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

*religious sentiment, by hiring celebrities to host ever more elaborate, though only marginally religious, shows*<sup>22</sup> because such spicy coverage of the religious themes has a market amongst the audience.

*“Op-ed pieces on the politics of Imran Khan – awash with meaningless words like ‘undercurrent’ and ‘middle-class narrative’ – are a dime a dozen in our newspapers. That’s because one, the writer doesn’t have to research the topic; and two, readers love to consume frivolous commentary on politics”*.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the activist media’s taste for sensationalism in the media is mainly demand driven instead of supply driven.

### **c. Human Resource Constraints**

Since the promulgation of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance 2002, Pakistani electronic media has grown phenomenally and within a little more than a decade 117 television channels have obtained licenses. This phenomenal growth of television channels outpaced the development of human resource required to run these channels.

Since the print media houses owned the majority of earlier television channels, the journalists working in the print media were deputed to man the television channels. Many of those columnists

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<sup>22</sup>Huma Yusuf, ‘Conversion Ratings,’ *International New York Times*, 08 August, 2012.

<sup>23</sup>KazimAlam, ‘Journalism and Sensationalism,’ The Express Tribune Blogs, entry posted December 23, 2011, <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/9416/journalism-and-sensationalism/> (accessed 14 November, 2013).

and reporters became the television anchor-persons. The situation of human resource availability for another important electronic media professional field journalist for the television channels i.e. cameraman, was even more dismal. The television channels hurriedly hired the cameramen on the basis of technical skills, regardless of the professional training of covering the news. The graphic coverage of violence and ruthless intrusion into the privacy of crime victims are mainly due to this lack of professionalism.

In the absence of professionalism, covering 24 hours of the air time every day becomes a challenging job and the television channels resort to 'fillers'. *"Such coverage may provide oxygen to these media outlets for a while, but in the long run, it could create more problems, and can even endanger their own survival".<sup>24</sup>*

## **2. Manifestations of Media Activism – Case Studies**

Media activism in Pakistan is manifesting itself in the following manners:-

### **a. Sensational Reporting of Crime**

The activist media in its zeal for breaking the news and being the first to report the details of an incident goes over board in sensationalism.

There are well-defined codes of ethics and established traditions across the world for reporting the victims of social crimes e.g. rape cases. Names and photographs of the victims or other particulars,

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<sup>24</sup>Amir Hamza Bangash, 'Electronic Media at Crossroads,' *Daily Times*, 06 May, 2013.

indicating their identity, must not be revealed<sup>25</sup>; the victim and family who are already traumatized cannot be interviewed; the medical report of the victim cannot be discussed.<sup>26</sup> In a recent incident of rape of a minor girl in Lahore, soon her name was all over the media, her face displayed, her family interviewed and the minutest particulars of her whereabouts telecast. She will not be allowed to forget the trauma, even long after her physical scars have healed. This insensitive reporting is mainly because of the non-professionalism in the activist media.

### **b. Blowing Matters out of Proportion**

Another manifestation of the activist media's lack of professionalism is its taste for frivolity and blowing things out of proportion. Similarly, the extensive media coverage of the preposterous claim of invention of a 'water car' by Asham inventor<sup>27</sup> caught the imagination of the entire Pakistani media for weeks. The iron-clad laws of physics, basic human intelligence and rationality were set aside to chase the spectacle by the talk-show anchors. The politicians jumped in to capitalize on the hype created by the mainstream media. The cataclysm of the fake invention demonstrated that Pakistani media badly lacked the professional capacity to analyze the matters before blowing any frivolity out of proportion.

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<sup>25</sup>TasneemAhmar, 'How the Media Should Cover Rape Cases,' *International New York Times*, 22 September, 2013.

<sup>26</sup>Syed TalatHussain, 'Lahore Rape Case Aur Hamari Coverage,' Saach.tv, entry posted September 16, 2013, <http://www.saach.tv/2013/09/16/lahore-rape-case-aur-hamari-coverage/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Agha Waqar Ahmad, an engineer who claimed that he could operate a car by using water as fuel.

### **c. Insensitive Exposure of Tragedies**

The media activism and the race to be first manifests the most in the non-professionalism in coverage of tragedies by the Pakistani media. For instance in the wake of media coverage of Bhoja Air Crash on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012, PEMRA had to issue a warning to the television channels against showing pictures of dead bodies and intruding into people's privacy. "*Reporters from different channels chased family members with microphones and cameras, capturing their grieving moments, not seeming to realize that this was a gross intrusion of their privacy*".<sup>28</sup> It appears as if a citizen's suffering is a business opportunity for the television channels to cash.

The rash and obscenely inappropriate reporting of the incident enraged the people and the social media was exploded with the public rage and everyone agreed that channels must give citizens the integrity and respect they deserve.<sup>29</sup> The Express Tribune conducted an online survey asking the participants if they approved or disapproved of how the media covered the Bhoja Air tragedy. A significant 77% of 1,247 participants disapproved it.<sup>30</sup>

### **d. Live Coverage of Law Enforcement Operations**

The desperation of the activist media to fill the airtime with sensationalism also manifests itself in the live coverage of law enforcement operations, severely compromising the operational

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<sup>28</sup>KiranNazish, 'Covering the Bhoja Air Crash,' *Express Tribune*, 21 April, 2012.

<sup>29</sup>MehreenKasana, 'Bhoja Air Crash: Where Are Our Media Ethics?' *Express Tribune*, 24 April, 2012.

<sup>30</sup>The Express Tribune, 'Bhoja Air Crash: Acceleration at Low Height Caused Mid-Air Explosion,' *Express Tribune*, 21 April, 2012.

requirements of law enforcement operations. The bullet-to-bullet coverage of Lal Masjid Operation, with a mounting pressure on the law enforcement agencies at the critical phase of operation and the live coverage of recent Sikandar saga in Blue Area, Islamabad, are the instances of media activism, transcending the limits of informing the public. In the Sikandar incident, despite repeated requests by the law enforcement agencies, intervention of the PEMRA and Ministry of Information, the media could not be persuaded to give a 15-minute break in the live coverage of the bizarre drama to enable the law enforcement authorities to conduct operation. *“Overtaking the role of police, while not giving it enough space to perform and later blaming them for their incompetence, pointless reports to keep the news running”*<sup>31</sup>, underscored the non-professionalism of the activist media. Again, in the online survey conducted by Express Tribune, 73% of the voters disapproved the media coverage of the incident.<sup>32</sup>

### **Impact of Media Activism on Psychology of Pakistani Society**

The media affects people’s opinions, perceptions and priorities and activist media affects those actively. Media activism is exerting a profound impact on different aspects of life of people, including the psychology. It influences the way we relate our attitudes, values and beliefs about the world.<sup>33</sup> It shapes our behavior about issues,

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<sup>31</sup>Farwa Zahra, ‘Sikandar Wasn’t the Real Blue Area Villain, It Was the Media,’ *The Express Tribune*, 16 August, 2013.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Stuart Fischhoff, ‘Media Psychology: A Personal Essay in Definition and Purview,’ American Psychological Association, <http://www.apa.org/divisions/div46/Fischhoff%20Essay%20on%20Media%20Psychology.pdf> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

concepts and situations, affects the responses to social situations and plays a vital role in highlighting personality traits and attributes.

- **Positive Impact**

The media activism has both positive and negative influences on the public psychology. The positive contribution of the activist media, to the public psychology in Pakistan is towards generating the rights consciousness amongst masses.

The media activism has exerted a positive psychological influence in generating a better rights consciousness amongst the masses. There is a direct correlation between the rights consciousness and the exposure to media – the urban middle class having more exposure to the media has an increased rights consciousness. This influence can be corroborated from the following social developments in Pakistani society.

- **Democratic Thinking**

The role of activist media in fostering the democratic values, politically and psychologically is pivotal. There is growing distaste for dictatorship in the country amongst the masses and democratic traditions have started taking roots. The debates in the ubiquitous talk shows in electronic media, featuring the political leaders fundamentally differing with each on issues, policies, conduct and performance have been underscoring the importance of democratic pluralism and acceptance of divergent opinions.

- **Consciousness of Rights**

People are becoming more aware of the rights they possess that other citizens particularly the government should not abridge. For instance there is increased consciousness of rights amongst the women themselves and the society at large. The centuries old discriminatory traditions like *vani*, and crimes like rape and acid-attacks, political discrimination through denial of voting rights to women in certain parts of the country remain under strict and frequent scrutiny by the activist media.

- **Respect for Human Dignity**

The activist media is instrumental in increasing the respect for human dignity. One can argue on the pace of development, but the torture at police stations, schools and domestic violence are becoming increasingly unacceptable at social level. The telephone videos recorded by the common people, flashing across the media screens are testimony to the general public being increasingly conscious of human dignity.

- **Sense of Public Accountability**

The media activism has contributed towards generating a sense of public accountability and psychologically empowered the people to put the public performance and conduct under scrutiny. With its gate keeping function, the activist media offers an increasingly coherent platform for articulating public demand and providing greater scrutiny of the public policy.

- **Negative Impact**

The media activism, with its sensational reporting of crime and violence, blowing frivolous matters out of proportions, insensitive exposure of tragedies and live coverage of law enforcement operations has been exerting more negative than positive influence on the psychology of the society.

- a. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

In a survey conducted by the Department of Psychiatry, Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Islamabad, it was revealed that out of 494 participants who reported watching TV for more than one hour per day for at least 5 days per week, 29.4% scored positive for PTSD and 47.6% for depression. The problem was more acute with those who had experienced a real-life trauma. Nearly half (45.3%) of those who had experienced real-life trauma and watched TV scored positive for PTSD.<sup>34</sup> Thus, watching television is affecting the mental health of the nation.

- b. Child Psychology**

Innumerable studies have revealed that violence in news and other television programs profoundly influences a child or adolescent's values, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours at a highly impressionable age.<sup>35</sup> It increases their fear of becoming

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<sup>34</sup>F Naeem et al., 'Can Watching Traumatic Events On Tv Cause Ptsd Symptoms? Evidence from Pakistan,' *ActaPsychiatricaScandinavica* 2, no. 1 (July 2012): 79-80.

<sup>35</sup>Parents Television Council, 'TV Bloodbath: Violence On Prime Time Broadcast TV,' Parents Television Council,

victims, makes them less sensitive to violence and victims of violence, increases their craving for more violence in entertainment and in real life. Violence in media programs leads them to do criminal acts. Television teaches the young viewers, who have more difficulty distinguishing between real life and the synthetic world of television that violence is the accepted manner of solving the problems.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the gory scenes of violence portrayed by the activist media on television screens are developing aggressive attitudes and antisocial behaviors amongst the children.

**c. Learnt Violence /Aggression**

The studies have revealed that the impact of violence depicted on the television screens is not limited only to the children it also affects the adults. Empirical evidence suggests, “*Media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts*”.<sup>37</sup> Besides, studies reveal that the more real-life the violence is depicted, the greater is the probability that it will be learnt. Violence, murder, bloodshed and physical abuse, appearing in the Pakistani media impacts the thoughts and emotions of the people and causes increased anxiety, anti-social behavior and increased violence in the society. According to Dr Rizwan Taj, the Head of Psychiatry Department, Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Islamabad, “*the portrayal of negativity on media leads to a feeling of frustration, which raises a*

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<http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/publications/reports/stateindustryviolence/main.asp> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

<sup>36</sup>Scott Herrington and Cindy Emmans, ‘Character Education and Media Literacy—finding Common Ground,’ *Technos*, 2002, 1-9.

<sup>37</sup>Craig Anderson and Douglas Gentile, *Media Violence, Aggression, and Public Policy* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 281-300.

*level of insecurity, which in turn, results in intolerance and aggression.*"<sup>38</sup>

#### **d. Desensitization & Brutalization**

Desensitization is another psychological impact on the people of Pakistan, due to excessive viewing of violence on the media. "*Desensitization is defined as the diminished emotional responsiveness to a negative or aversive stimulus after repeated exposure to it*".<sup>39</sup> Psychological theories say that people tend to lose their ability to select non-aggressive actions in their daily life, if they watch frequent violent alternatives happening around them.

Militaries use desensitization and brutalization as techniques for training soldiers to kill. The activist media, with its graphic depiction of violence, blood, gory scenes of bomb blasts, has brought this desensitization and brutalisation to the society at large. The excessive exposure of violence on the television screens is increasing desensitization in the society and apathy towards the victims, of violence as there is a growing acceptance of violence as a way of life.

#### **e. Copycat Crime**

The sensationalist depiction of violence and crime on the activist Pakistani media is also leading to the replication of crime, commonly termed by psychologists as copycat crime. "*A copycat*

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<sup>38</sup>RizwanTaj, interviewed by author, Islamabad, Pakistan, December 11, 2013.

<sup>39</sup>*Wikipedias.v.* 'Desensitization,' <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

*crime occurs when someone tries to imitate another criminal or style of crime*".<sup>40</sup> The sensationalism and glorification of crimes by the activist media has a copycat effect. The instances of this copycat effect are the waves of gang rapes after the sensational coverage of the 'Mukhtaran Mai case' and the spate of child molestation cases immediately after the Lahore minor girl rape case. So, the media activism and its sensational publicity of violence and crime are resulting in the proliferation of copycat crime in the society.

#### **f. Cynicism / Negativity**

The activist media, in a bid to attract interest, has a strong tendency to exaggerate and negatively portray the neutral or even positive situations. There are innumerable instances of cameramen selectively covering the incidents, to exaggerate negative aspects and even coaxing the people to make negative statements in interviews, as only then the editorial team will select it for airing.

The studies have revealed that there exists a 'negativity bias' in our brains. One such study revealed that there was an increase in neural firing in the brain, when people were shown negative images compared to when they were shown positive images.<sup>41</sup> It demonstrates that showing violence and negativity on screen has a multiplier effect on generation of negativity. It generates cynicism and a rampant belief in the conspiracy theories.

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<sup>40</sup>Richard Amaral, 'Copycat Crimes: Why Do They Happen?' Psychology for Growth, <http://www.psychologyforgrowth.com/copycat-crimes-why-do-they-happen/> (accessed 13 November, 2013).

<sup>41</sup>Mallory Meter and Jacob Minnaugh, "Be Afraid, America. Be Very Afraid: The Effect of Negative Media," *Neuroanthropology*, entry posted April 25, 2010, <http://neuroanthropology.net/2010/04/25/be-afraid-america-be-very-afraid-the-effect-of-negative-media/> (accessed 15 November, 2013).

**g. Demoralization**

The consistent negative portrayal of the social evils, crime, violence and terrorism, followed by the superficial analyses with sweeping negative statements about the Pakistani society— a society at the verge of collapse, an economy at the brink of insolvency, a complete institutional breakdown and compulsive malevolence of Pakistani character – deeply demoralize the society. The prevalent pessimism, feeble national pride and masochist self-criticism are the natural outcome of this rampant ‘Pakistan bashing’ at the activist Pakistani media. The exaggerated depiction of social failings in the activist media is inimical to the national self-confidence and individual morale.

**h. Shallow Public Opinion**

The coverage of events by the activist media and the debate on issues usually lacks depth. A large part of such coverage falls in the category of superficial narratives – a debate at the superficial layer, devoid of meaningful insight. The round-the-clock media coverage of issues in a volatile manner never results in a healthy public opinion, but always yields one-sided, superficial and fragile public opinion, which can be easily broken and transformed as needed. A sound and healthy public opinion is essential for a strong informed society.

The shallow treatment of subjects and sensationalism also causes the prejudicial thinking amongst the people. For instance, the sensationalist coverage of the rape incidents, in many instances, results in justifying the acts of rapists. The media coverage creates

the impression that the victim's behavior, character and dressing provoked the rape and that she asked for it.

- **Impact on Psychology of Governance**

The intellectual space in Pakistan, fuelled daily by the activist media, remains too pre-occupied with the shallow and sensational subjects, which affects the psychology of governance in the country. The serious issues of economic development, policy reform, private sector development, low ranking in global competitiveness and cost of doing business indicators, don't find space in the debate on the media. *“Media wants headline against the government, not fodder for reform. Consequently, all governments regardless of creed and origin have avoided serious governance/civil service reform.... No government has attempted to use public service delivery to underpin our governance approach.... Countries seeking development spend a far larger proportion of their public debate on crucial development issues than we do”*.<sup>42</sup>

If the activist media does not pick up the issues, which require policy reform, it will never signal the policy-makers and politicians to reform nor will it create space for a debate on the issues that really matter.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Nadeem ul Haq, “The Media, Society and Development”, *Daily Times*, 27 December, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## **Public Policy Recommendations**

The explosive growth of electronic media, instead of an organic one, has resulted in myriad of socio-political and psychological issues, both in latitudinal and longitudinal ways.

Media activism has played a positive role in continuously supporting the socio-political movements, exposing corruption, emphasizing transparency and applying pressure for good governance in the country.

However, the rat race for ratings, energized by the commercial interests of the media houses, has led to misplaced activism, which relegates professional ethos and code of conduct to the overriding commercialism.

This activism takes many shapes and forms: (a) sensationalist reporting, (b) superficial debates, (c) trivializing the important issues and vice versa, (d) graphic coverage of gory scenes, and (e) breach of people's privacy.

Media activism impacts the psychology of people in negative and positive ways. On the upside, it has contributed towards a rights consciousness amongst the populace, an appreciation of the dignity of human life and a sense of empowerment of masses.

In order to bring sobriety and maturity in the media, the following steps need to be taken by the stakeholders – media houses, government, journalists associations and civil society:-

1. In order to have professional human resource for the media, a media institute needs to be set up through private public

partnership between the media houses and Government especially for the training of technical personnel in the electronic media – cameramen, editorial staff and reporters. The curriculum should focus on training the journalists for investigative and analytical journalism.

2. A lax code of conduct for the media already exists, which needs strengthening. In order to overcome the resistance by the media to any externally imposed code of conduct, PEMRA should engage with the media to develop its own code of conduct. The civil society and academia may be involved in the development of the code, to break the resistance of the media in this regard.
3. PEMRA should not abdicate its responsibility of media regulator, by being overawed by the powerful media houses. While any attempt at censorship of political content by PEMRA must be avoided, a strict adherence to the code of conduct needs to be ensured. PEMRA's internal professionalization would be essential before asserting any professional ethics on the media outlets.
4. A Media Ombudsman may be appointed on the models of Australia, Sweden and South Africa. The Ombudsman be mandated to represent the interests of the public by investigating the complaints of violation of public rights by the media. The complaints regarding the practices of the media can be reported by the general public to the Media Ombudsman, who will determine whether the actions of a media outlet are in line with good journalistic practices. This role can be assigned to the office of Federal Ombudsman, by establishing a special branch for media complaints.

5. The phenomenal growth of the social media has emerged as an effective counterpoise to the exercise of disproportionate power by the mass media. This power of social media needs to be institutionally harnessed by the civil society to become a watch-dog of the watchdog (mass media).

**Conclusion**

To conclude, there is a taste for drama amongst the masses and the media groups provide the same. It seems that the society gets what it wants. Just because the society gets, what it wants, does not mean that it gets what it needs. The lack of professionalism and a penchant for sensationalism, driven by amoral commercialism in the media is causing tremendous damage to the psychology of the Pakistani people. A comprehensive strategy to ensure the observance of media ethics through media monitoring and public discussions is needed to channelize the potential of the media for development of a healthy and informed society.