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Journalism Versus Anchorism: A Case Study of Sar-E-Aam Program of ARY TV and its Reporting Approaches

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Abstract

The study explores the effects of media with regard to different programs designed to highlight social issues. This is the critical analysis of "Sar e Aam" programmes by the ARY News. It is known for attracting viewers through investigative journalism, and the content claims that it exposes corruption, crimes, and social injustices through operations. The show's content is qualitatively analyzed through the pattern of anchorism, which is linked with journalism by some anchors without having education in media studies. Based on the Social Responsibility Theory, the study finds that while focusing on sensationalism some aspects of standardized journalism have been challenged. It was found that the anchor invaded the subjects' privacy during the operations, which is the mandate of law enforcement agencies. This research contributes to the broader discourse on media ethics in Pakistan, calling for a more balanced approach that upholds journalistic integrity while serving the public interest.

Keywords: Anchorism, Ethics, Journalism, Objectivity, Sensationalism

Authors:

Samina Kalsoom: M.Phil Scholar, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Bakht Zaman: (Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: bakhtzaman@gmail.com)

Arooba Iftikhar: MPhil Scholar, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

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Authors:

Samina Kalsoom: M.Phil Scholar, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Bakht Zaman: (Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: bakhtzaman@gmail.com)

Arooba Iftikhar: MPhil Scholar, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Contents

- Introduction
- Research Question
- Research Objectives
- Theoretical Framework
- Research Methodology
- Case Study Analysis
- Discussion and Conclusion
- References

Abstract

The study explores the effects of media with regard to different programs designed to highlight social issues. This is the critical analysis of "Sar e Aam" programmes by the ARY News. It is known for attracting viewers through investigative journalism, and the content claims that it exposes corruption, crimes, and social injustices through operations. The show's content is qualitatively analyzed through the pattern of anchorism, which is linked with journalism by some anchors without having education in media studies. Based on the Social Responsibility Theory, the study finds that while focusing on sensationalism some aspects of standardized journalism have been challenged. It was found that the anchor invaded the subjects' privacy during the operations, which is the mandate of law enforcement agencies. This research contributes to the broader discourse on media ethics in Pakistan, calling for a more balanced approach that upholds journalistic integrity while serving the public interest.

Keywords: Anchorism, Ethics, Journalism, Objectivity, Sensationalism

Introduction

Journalism is gathering, assembling, and circulating news through media to inform the public while maintaining its trust, obligation, and social responsibility to truth and accuracy (Christians, 2012). The media's commitment to objectivity, balance, neutrality, and independence are standards in journalism ethics. In professional practice, journalistic morality requires impartiality over commercial gains, ratings, and sensationalism (Raza & Akbar, 2013). Anchorism refers to the hosting of a program which is comparatively a latest phenomenon emerged with the growth of private television channels in Pakistan. It is a style of reporting and presenting news with commentary, and most of the time adding personal biases to it which negates the basic concept of objectivity in standardized journalism. Anchors are also known as show moderators and are usually

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encouraged to have such shows that are filled with dramatized content and sensationalism but ensure maximum rating to the media house. They shape the program's content with a personal bias and neglect the ethical standards of quality journalism that ensure impartial, balanced, and accurate reporting of news.

It has been observed that both journalists and anchors share some overlapping responsibilities and contribute to public awareness and societal development. Anchors focus on presentation and delivering the news in a more polished and engaging manner whereas a journalist's responsibilities include investigation, fact-checking, truth, evidence, and research. While many journalists can become anchors, not all anchors can be journalists as they do not have the journalistic background, proper education, skills, experience, and ethical commitments. This highlights that formal education in media studies is important for journalists. Despite their related roles, journalists and anchors are not synonymous, and their roles are different and not interchangeable.

Since the independence of Pakistan in 1947, media has been under the control of the government. However, in 2002 under the dictatorial regime of General Parvez Musharraf, the then Army Chief and President of Pakistan, the Liberalisation of media led to the advent of private TV channels, thus creating an opportunity for anchors (Gul et al., 2017). To stay competitive in a rapidly evolving media market, private channels focused on 24/7 transmission, so they had to fill the 24-hour airtime with content. They created filler content like talk shows, news analysis, current affairs programs, and repetition of news but soon they realized the need for distinctive programs that could grab the audience's attention. One such program is an investigative crime television show, *Sar e Aam.*

Sar e Aam, premiered on ARY News Network has been on air since March 3, 2012. Starring Iqrar ul Hassan Syed, formerly a news anchor and currently an anchor of the program, the program's structure consists of a mix of news, analysis, and opinion and its format creates suspense through such dramatic and sensational narratives that fits well with the private TV channels requirement of the filler content. The show uncovers various social problems and injustices in society but the anchor's sensational tactics and the focus on ratings, presentation, and sensational reporting by using sensational headlines, graphics, and dramatic music often blurs the line between anchorism and journalism by compromising factual accuracy and credibility of the show. The program's content involves exposing truth, crimes, sting operations, and social activism through its investigative reporting methods.

Investigative journalism is more than regular journalism and is distinct from regular news reporting because it goes beyond exposed news and involves an in-depth investigation of a certain subject, crime, or issue that is difficult to access and the accountable people try to conceal it (Wuergler et al., 2023). David Kaplan, the chief executive officer of the Global Investigative Journalism Network has identified some elements of investigative journalism that involve persistence, in-depth factual reporting, interviewing, contextualizing, verifying information, analysis, accountability, and presenting a compelling narrative. The use of investigative journalism is an important aspect of *Sar e Aam* Program Structure and Reporting Methods.

While Iqrar ul Hassan has been praised usually for his investigative reporting his dramatic way of presenting news and his questionable reporting style have undermined the systemic analysis and context of the issues prevailing in society because if the context of a story is not analyzed and accurately presented without bias, then the understanding of full picture is missing and misleading (Kaplan, 2013). He often exceeds limits while conducting investigations by using coercive methods and is criticized for his confrontational style of bullying often intimidating others and making them feel uncomfortable. He passes judgments and avoids counterarguments so instead of taking the role of a judge while addressing the issue, he should maintain his role as an information provider.

The preliminary study finds that the anchor sensationalizes the atmosphere but compromises the standards of responsible reporting and is even accused of breaching the privacy of others by using hidden cameras and microphones in private settings. He prioritizes ratings and sensationalism by filming others without their consent and sharing their names and life experiences, knowing that

sensationalism not only creates hype but also creates a false perception of news events (Othman, 2023). For this, he may be liable for a criminal offense under Section 499 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) according to which, any words or visible illustration that contains any charge or accusation and is likely to harm the reputation of others is defamation. In the Defamation Ordinance of 2002, Section 500 of the PPC makes it a crime to defame another person. The show *Sar e Aam* can be considered defamatory for some false accusations, making individuals recognizable to the public and prioritizing malice without verifying actual information, and some of them are later acquitted by the court of law.

Sar e Aam has gained popularity for exposing crimes, corruption, and other social problems and has irrefutably played a major role in empowering citizens and driving social change by raising awareness about fraud, corruption, injustice, and abuse of power by authorities but the program's reliance on ratings, sensationalism, privacy violations causes damage to individuals regardless of their guilt or innocence. The use of aggression, force, and false promises in the exchange of information has impacted the transparency and trust in the audience because the relationship between media and society is a complex phenomenon that needs a basic qualification in journalism to be understood which the anchor lacks. Media acts as a watchdog for society and has an extraordinarily strong impact and influence on society (Agrawal et al., 2022). Media must represent accuracy in its content objectively, and *Sar e Aam* by representing social evils builds public opinion but instead of framing those issues in a dramatic manner for ratings, the host should set an agenda for a community's development because media shapes public opinion in a specific direction (Liao, 2023).

Sar e Aam through its discoveries under the umbrella of investigative content influences public opinion but Investigative Journalists face various threats and challenges from those in power who try to limit their ability to influence societal discourse. It also indicates that those who try to unearth social evils should take the concerned law enforcing agency on board for these operations, instead of doing it for rating purposes. In Pakistan, investigative Journalism is not an easy task as they face death threats, torture, detention, physical assault, and pressure from both political and economic elites (Riaz, 2021). Iqrar ul Hassan also received many threats and encountered numerous attacks, which to media experts is because of his reporting style which is driven by sensationalism instead of a mission. According to Pakistan Today (2024) in March 2024, his residence was fired upon by a shooter. According to Bol News (2024), people also attacked him, and they threw acid on his car. Despite being at risk, he performs investigative tasks so the government needs to provide necessary safety and protection measures to investigative Journalists so they can perform their tasks without fear of harm and serve the public interest, but at the same time the journalists or anchors should take a social responsibility upon their shoulders and there must be a code of conduct for this adventurous journalism.

The mixing of journalism and anchors in Pakistani media has raised concerns about the credibility of news and ethical standards of quality journalism. *Sar e Aam* by jumping in this trend has blurred the thin lines between journalism and anchorism because of its strong emphasis on sensationalism and entertainment. The program's prioritization of sensational music, sensationalized headlines, and ratings over journalistic ethics have had a significant impact on the credibility of the show. The study aims to analyze selected episodes of the program *Sar e Aam* to highlight how the host of the show compromises the ethical standards of quality journalism.

Research Question

How does *Sar e Aam's* reporting method challenge ethical journalism?

Research Objectives

To analyze the impact of anchorism on news presentation in *Sar e Aam* by ARY TV Network.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the Social Responsibility Theory, which is a normative theory of press and media that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitation of both the libertarian and authoritarian theories. It suggests that media should be free from the control of government, but it ought to serve the public good and uphold

certain ethical standards. The theory also emphasizes the role of media in fostering democratic processes, promoting public welfare, and ensuring that information is presented accurately and no social value is challenged. Since the study looks into the content of *Sar e Aam*, by examining the process through issues reported, is why this theory used as a guiding tool, for how the anchor considers the social, and moral values of the society?

The case study cited to support this conceptual view is the popular investigative TV show *Sar e Aam*. The anchor's investigative reporting methods (tone and presentation style), program's content (use of hidden cameras, sting operations), visuals and graphics, sensational music, and dramatic sound effects enhance the impact of the program content, thus creating a powerful stimulus that grabs the audience's attention. The program's content shapes audience perception so stimulus evokes cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects by influencing their thoughts, behavior, and emotions.

Social Responsibility Theory is an ethical theory that states that the media has a duty to prioritize social responsibility. *Sar e Aam's* investigative journalism benefits society by prioritizing the interests of the general public by promoting awareness of societal ills, addressing social chaos, and exposing injustices. Instead of focusing on ratings, dramatized content, and sensationalism, social responsibility theory highlights the need for accurate reporting, transparent investigation, and credible sources because investigative journalism has the ability to bring inspiring and positive social change. Despite exposing the serious issues prevailing in society it raises concerns about the anchor-driven methods in the program. The program frames issues in a dramatic way by using sensational headlines which has blurred the lines between objective reporting and anchor-driven storytelling. The issues raised in the program might be of the anchor's choice, values, beliefs, and interests which raises concerns about the agenda bias and its effects on the audience.

Research Methodology

The research gives detailed analysis and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data. Both these methods are used to answer the research questions. In the qualitative case study approach of *Sar e Aam*, the Purposive sampling technique is used for in-depth analysis of the focused sample and to evaluate the program's commitment to the professional journalist code of ethics outlined by the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (AEJMC). These standards are important to maintain credibility in journalism maintain public trust and develop a well-informed society. The research employs the qualitative method because of its investigative nature as it offers a vision to different problems. The method of content analysis is used to analyze the structure of the program and reporting methods used by the host of the show to explain how it has blurred the lines between journalism and anchors. The study is purely carried out for academic purposes aimed at making the journalists understand the thin line between objective and subjective reporting, and educating them that no news is worth more than their lives. The journalists should live to report tomorrow's news too. Various information is obtained through the critical analysis of the investigative methods of the host for a fair assessment of the structure of the program and reporting methods. For the Discourse analysis, the coding method is used to analyze the context of each episode of the program, examine the accuracy and objectivity of the information provided, and evaluate the transparency and accountability of the anchor in storytelling. The research adopts quantitative analysis in a way that five episodes of the program *Sar-e-Aam* are analyzed because the selected five episodes feature a more prominent display of the anchor's sensational tactics, confirmed by the YouTube views of these shows. Furthermore, it is based on various other aspects like impartiality, privacy breach, respect for subjects, etc. The findings needed assessment so mathematical computations such as fractions and percentages are also incorporated into the study.

Case Study Analysis

Table 1

Episodes	Ethical standards		
	Respect for subjects	Tone & language	Breach of privacy
Kidnapping of infants	Treated with respect	Harsh tone	Occurred
Online job scam	Treated with respect	Decent	No
Unveiled the miracles of Pir Haq Khateeb	Respect shown towards the subject	Decent	Free from privacy violations
Raid on ice cream and snacks factory	Treated with respect	Decent	No
Fake stamp scam	Yes	Decent	Yes

Table 2

Episodes	Reporting approach		
	Objectivity	Balance	Sensationalism
Kidnapping of infants	Free from biased	Multiple narratives presented	Sensational music
Online job scam	Unbiased	Balanced	Sensational music
Unveiled the miracles of Pir Haq Khateeb	Compromised impartiality	Undermined credibility	Sensational
Raid on ice cream and snacks factory	Not biased	Balanced reporting	Not dramatised
Fake stamp scam	Relatively objective	Somewhat balanced	Exaggerated

Table 3

Episodes	Program format		
	Visuals & Graphics	Evidence Presented	Closing Sequence
Kidnapping of infants	Slightly dramatized	Corroborative and disclosure from anonymous source	Exposed truth
Online job scam	Sensational headers	Confidential, off the record	Quick recap
Unveiled the miracles of Pir Haq Khateeb	Dramatized	Somewhat clear	Unmasked deceptive illusions
Raid on ice cream and snacks factory	Straightforward	Clear evidence	Final tagline
Fake stamp case	Sensational	Moderately convincing	Concluded without resolution

Table 4

Episodes	The way forward		
	Expert opinion	Solution oriented	Follow-up
Kidnapping of infants	Presented	Not	No follow-up
Online job scam	Not presented	Not	Follow-up report
Unveiled the miracles of Pir Haq Khateeb	No authoritative view	Not	Follow-up announcement message
Raid on ice cream and snacks factory	Taken	No fixes suggested	No follow-up report

Episodes	The way forward		
	Expert opinion	Solution oriented	Follow-up
Fake stamp case	Not taken	Reporting focused only on presenting problems	No further action

Kidnapping of Infants: Iqrar-ul-Hasan in his program raised a critical issue of child trafficking and child abduction in a country (Hassan, 2023). He conducted a sting operation on the kidnapping of infants. While investigating he maintained a professional but harsh tone to extract information and even offered a deal to one of the child sellers by stating that if she provided him with the information she would not get in trouble. The report mentioned the names of those involved in the selling of children. The names of people who adopted children were also revealed. He should have considered protecting their privacy by using sound effects or pitch shifting. The program was sensationalized by playing sensational background music throughout the episode. No solution was presented and there was no follow-up on the case.

Online job scam: The anchor has addressed the issue of online job scams and blackmail attempts during interviews (Hassan, 2024). He adopted a balanced approach during the investigation and the report presented was impartial and objective but with sensational presentation. The evidence was corroborative and based on an anonymous source. Some details were blurred because of the privacy concerns of the victims and their sensitive information was protected. The program ended with a final short recap of the entire episode and the viewers were later updated by a follow-up report on another episode.

Unveiled the miracles of Pir Haq Khateeb: The anchor deserves praise for unmasking the fraudulent spiritual leaders in Pakistan (Hasaan, 2024). He exposed the spiritual healing illusions and swindles of Pir Haq Khateeb, but he should have focused only on exposing him and should have refrained from challenging the subject to maintain objectivity and ensure balanced reporting. But his act of challenging the Pir and sensationalizing the evidence has undermined the impartiality and credibility of the report which shows some little elements of bias. The duty of the investigative journalist is to present the evidence and hand over the case to the concerned department so they can take proper action. Furthermore, he should have provided a clearer understanding of this fraud by capturing the moment Pir's workers practice those deceptive illusions, as is often the case of his investigations by undercover recording.

Raid on an ice-cream and snacks factory: The anchor Iqrar-ul-Hasan along with the Director General Food Authority of Punjab conducted a raid on the ice cream and snacks factory (Hassan, 2024). The anchor maintained a professional tone throughout the raid. The workers there were treated with respect and the management was interviewed using decent language. Moreover, the information presented was unbiased and the reporting exposed clear evidence of the use of expired ingredients, unsanitary conditions of food factories, and poor handling of food processing but there were no recommendations for improvement. The visuals and graphics were not sensationalized. Notably, there was no update on the factory's response to this investigative report.

Fake stamp scam: The anchor exposed a scam of fake documents and confronted those individuals who were involved in creating those fake e-stamp papers (Hassan, 2024). Though he used decent language and showed respect towards the subjects but compromised their privacy by showing their faces and revealing their identities. The report was balanced in some respects, but he didn't acknowledge the fact that those papers cannot be verified through the government-provided phone number mentioned in the stamp. The anchor took the issue to the Assistant Commissioner (AC) office, but no expert opinion or solution was offered, nor there was an update regarding the issue, and the program ended with a sensational wrap-up music.

By analyzing the selected five episodes of the program, it is observed that sensationalism was prioritized in a consistent manner in 70% of these episodes but it is also observed in most of the other episodes of the program as well. The anchor maintained respect towards the subject throughout all these episodes 5/5 and used decent tone and language in 4/5 episodes. Privacy breaches occurred

twice on 2/5. There was unbiased reporting in 3/5 episodes. Multiple narratives were allowed only once 1/5. In 4/5 episodes, the program's presentation was sensationalized using sensational music, visuals, and graphics. 2/5 episodes provided unmistakable evidence of the issue. Opinion from experts was taken in 2/5 episodes and none of the episodes were solution oriented 0/5.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the rapidly evolving media landscape, the case study of investigative journalism program *Sar-e-Aam's* reporting methods provides a critical lens to examine the interplay between traditional journalism and anchor-driven reporting methods. The anchor addressed serious problems prevailing in society and the program aimed to inform the public about social issues ranging from theft, swindling, and corruption scandals to exposes but usually the content was dramatized. The anchor created a set-up or curated situations and the program's sensational approach has consequences for the accused individuals. They are shamed before any formal charges or legal proceedings against them. This creates serious concerns about ethical reporting practices and the anchor needs to understand the impactful presentation of news information. Storytelling must not compromise the standards of quality journalism.

The study concludes that the program's focus was on sensationalism and has compromised the objectivity and impartiality of investigative reporting at a few stages. The host is found invading the privacy of the subjects, so he needs a balance between the public's right to know and the individual's right to privacy while maintaining sensationalism and objectivity together. The anchors must conduct balanced investigative reporting by verifying the facts and sources of the information provided. He must keep the news report straightforward by providing its context along with the content and prioritizing ethical considerations instead of sensationalizing it for ratings. He needs not to breach the privacy of individuals unless it is especially important to disclose for raising awareness and protecting harm to others. The study also concludes that unearthing social evils in society is an appreciable effort by every media house, including the ARY but there must be certain guiding principles designed by the quarter concerned to be followed by media practitioners so that objectivity is ensured up to the maximum level. There is also a lesson for the upcoming journalists or students of media studies, before taking up the microphone and camera and invading someone's office or residence they must learn the basic ethics of reporting, and know that people like Iqrar Ul Hassan have reached this level of fame after a consistent hard work, so if anyone with less or no experience goes for this adventure can bring harm to himself as well as to the channel, which is not recommended.

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