

Representation of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani, British and American Media: A Case Study of the Abbottabad Operation

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Abstract

This research paper draws on the representation of Osama bin Laden, after his killing in the Abbottabad Operation, in the Pakistani, British and American media. The aim of this research is to look into the coverage of major national and international media outlets and to assess how they portrayed Osama bin Laden. The media outlets studied in this research study include: Dawn, The New York Times, Guardian, Geo News, Dunya News and PTV News. The content of these media outlets have been studied for the ten consecutive days. In order to ensure the better argument, the first three statements particularly made about bin Laden in the stories were collected, coded and studied. The findings – based on the Quantitative Content Analysis – demonstrate that almost all the selected media outlets stayed critical of Osama bin Laden after his killing in Abbottabad. It further demonstrates that the selected TV channels and newspapers covered it in independent way – without any fear of repercussions from Taliban or al-Qaida.

Keywords: Abbottabad Operation, bin Laden's death, representation, national and international media, critical coverage

Introduction

Osama bin Laden was shot dead by the U.S. Navy Seals in an Operation “Neptune Spear”, which took place in Abbottabad, Pakistan. It lasted for almost forty minutes and left five dead and two injured. The dead included the bin Laden, his son and his trusted courier. The operation enabled the U.S. to kill bin Laden who was the alleged architect of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in U.S. and 7/7 attacks in U.K.

U.S. and her allies chased bin Laden for more than a decade. It resulted in the War on Terror, one of the longest wars and manhunts in the human history, which left thousands dead and millions affected. The operation set a tone of celebration in U.S. as they got the man they chased for so long. However, the situation in Pakistan was bit different: as initially it was welcomed officially, but later condemned (Gillani 2011; Zardari 2011; Gall 2014, p.256).

The trove of the documents collected from the villa of bin Laden also support that he did not live a static life in the compound. He was in touch with the other militants and also paid field visits in different parts of the country (Gall 2014, p.248). Many in

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Pakistan accuse him of terrorist attacks and for destabilizing Pakistan; nonetheless, there are also sympathizers of bin Laden. It is evident from the praying for the soul of bin Laden in the National Assembly of Pakistan; calling bin Laden a “martyr” on the floor of Provincial Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; or even saying a funeral prayer in his absentia in the premises of Peshawar High Court building (Crilly 2011; NDTV 2011).

Thus, it gives the importance to the issue to look into the representation of bin Laden after his killing in the Pakistani, American and British media. Following is the research question that has been answered in this study:

1. How was bin Laden represented in the selected print and electronic media outlets after his killing in Abbottabad Operation?

The answer to this question will help us achieve the following objectives:

1. Did the selected media outlets stay critical, friendly or indifferent to bin Laden after his killing?
2. It will further demonstrate: whether the selected media outlets showed some sort of responsibility by shying away from the rhetoric regarding bin Laden or they adhered to it?

The data of the TV channels, which includes *Geo News*, *Dunya News* and *PTV News*, will be discussed separately from the print media, which includes *Dawn*, *The New York Times* and *Guardian*.

Literature Review

Abbottabad Operation, instead of bridging gap among the allies by boosting their confidence and trust in the on-going War on Terror, created the rift. The operation was welcomed in the US, which is evident from celebration on the streets of U.S., but it created controversies in Pakistan. The Pakistani government initially welcomed the operation by calling it the victory of allies of War on Terror, but they later changed their stance after public pressure (in the form of protests on the streets) and divide within the institutions (ruling government and establishment) (Marwan 2016). It is also important to note that there was some sort of official silence on the issue as it was brought to the parliament after six days.

The prevailing confused scenario gave opportunity to the conservative lawmakers, politico-religious parties and even different radical organizations to come on front and take on the political stage. They tried to cash his death by staging protests on roads in Pakistan against his killing and US attack. Moreover, they even offered funeral prayer (for bin Laden) in his absentia not only on the streets, but also in the highly reputed Peshawar High Court building (NDTV 2011). It was further embarrassing to see that even the lawmakers in Pakistan’s national and provincial assemblies offered ‘Fatiha’ (Prayer for one’s departed soul in Islam) for bin Laden (Crilly 2011). It indicates that the sympathies were on rise, in Pakistan, for bin Laden among the conservative people.

Despite the reservations of some sections of Pakistan, the Abbottabad Operation delivered a huge blow to Al Qaeda, Taliban and other militant organizations around the world as they lost one of their charismatic leaders. It also generated a huge debate in media about the future of these terror organizations and the on-going War on Terror. Thussu and Freedman (2003, p. 4-5) argue that while reporting the conflict situation, the mainstream media plays a vital role both as a 'publicist' and 'crucial observer'. They claim that still many journalists and liberal commentators support the view that journalists should report the event objectively and independently. It will be further observed in this research study that what role the selected media outlets played while addressing the bin Laden. It will also demonstrate whether the pressure tactics from the conservative segment of the society influenced their media coverage regarding bin Laden.

It is considered important for the good journalism that journalists should detach themselves from the 'public pain', even when reporting a domestic tragedy, and follow the true journalistic principles. Most of the times, it has been observed that different print and electronic media outlets due to the strong official pressure usually take a patriotic stand at the time of crisis. It stands true for many countries including the US where the officials on many instances insisted on it. Once, in October 2001, Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's National Security Advisor, told television network executives to exercise caution while broadcasting videotapes of the bin Laden; as, she claimed, it could be a signal to terrorists to attack (Magder 2003, p.37). Ex-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher also once warned, "democracies must find a way to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend" (Cottle 2006, p.144). The same directives have also been issued by the officials of the U.S. allies during the War on Terror, like Ex-Information Minister of Pakistan Sheikh Rashid Ahmed once threatened the journalists with the use of anti-terrorism laws if they continued to portray militants as the 'real heroes of the society' or 'glorify' them. The U.S. and its allies declared bin Laden a 'terrorist'— but the Abbottabad Operation also failed to bring them on a single page. This research exploring a query— did it leave impact on the recognition of common enemy by the respective media outlets— demonstrates the resulting answers.

In Pakistan, it is difficult for the reporters to look independently into the issue (IFJ 2014). The journalists are scared of repercussions from both the powerful establishment and Taliban. In past, several journalists have remained on the hit list of Taliban for propagating progressive views and several others also lost their lives for reporting issues related to war on terror, like: Musa Khan kheil, Saleem Shahzad, Hayat Ullah Wazir and Mukarram Khan Aatif etc. (BBC News 2012; Gall 2014). The militants in Swat also issued the hit list containing names of a few prominent journalists from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which forced the International Federation of Journalists and Reporters without Borders to write a letter to the then President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari to take measures for the safety of the journalists (Dawn 2009). It will be further tested in this research whether the fear of attack from Taliban hindered the way of journalists, especially in Pakistan, to come hard on bin Laden or not.

Research Framework

This research paper looks into the coverage of the death of bin Laden across the Pakistani, British and American media outlets. Among the print, it includes the *Dawn* newspaper from Pakistan; *The New York Times* from the U.S. and the *Guardian* from the U.K. Among the electronic media outlets, it includes the *Geo News* and *Dunya News* from the private TV networks of Pakistan and *PTV News* as the official broadcaster of Pakistan.

It is important to look into the coverage of both the print and electronic media outlets, as it will ensure the delayed and immediate response to the issue. Please note that later in the findings section, the data of the print media outlets will be analyzed separately from the electronic media outlets of Pakistan.

It is important to select the *Dawn* newspaper from Pakistan, as it is considered one of the historic newspapers of Pakistan, founded by the Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah – the founder of Pakistan. It is considered the ‘authoritative’ newspaper of Pakistan. It is widely circulated newspaper of Pakistan serving the professionals (Singh 2001).

Similarly, *The New York Times* is also arguably one of the leading newspapers of U.S and even the world. It is considered the ‘premier newspaper’ read by the nation’s elite (Dimitrova and Lee 2009). Many researchers claim that it is the voice of the ‘liberals’. *Guardian* newspaper, on the other hand, is considered the voice of liberals (Negrine 2008, p. 631). It is one of the highest circulated newspapers of UK serving the teachers, professionals and elite.

Geo News and *Dunya News*, selected in this research study, are the leading private TV networks of Pakistan. They are among the list of highly watched private TV channels of Pakistan. Similarly, the *PTV News* is the official broadcaster of Pakistan and has the terrestrial set up to cover more area.

In order to ensure the valid argument, it was necessary to collect the large amount of data. Thus, the content of these selected media outlets was studied for the ten consecutive days – starting from the bin Laden’s death. The content of the *New York Times*, *Geo News*, *Dunya News* and *PTV News* was studied from May 2, 2011 to May 11, 2011; while the content of *Dawn* and *Guardian* was studied from May 3, 2011 to May 12, 2011. The difference in the dates is due to the difference in the standard times of U.S., U.K and Pakistan and also the time of the incident – Abbottabad Operation.

All the news stories, in both the print and electronic media, carrying the name ‘Osama bin Laden’ were selected, coded, and studied. In the print media, all the news pages carrying these stories were studied; while in the electronic media outlets, 3:00 pm afternoon bulletins and 9:00 pm night bulletins were studied as they are considered the main bulletins of the day by all the selected TV channels. The total number of news stories studied in this research study is 981. It includes 216 of *Geo News*; 184 of *Dunya News*; 51 of *PTV News*; 164 of *Dawn*; 71 of *Guardian*; and 80 of *The New York Times*.

Research Method

The best research method, which can answer the outstanding research question, raised in this research study, is the “Quantitative Content Analysis”. There are many researchers who argue that it is the best research method when clear hypothesis or research questions are posed.

Charles R. Wright (cited in Berger 2000, p. 273) defines content analysis as “the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories”. The similar approach was adopted in this research study as well by laying out the different variables in the form of statements made about bin Laden.

Hansen (1998, p. 95) also claims: “Content Analysis by definition is a Quantitative Method and it basically stresses on identifying and counting the occurrences of the specified characteristics or dimensions of the text and on the basis of which one is able to say something about the messages, images, and representations of such texts and their wider social significance”. The same procedure has been followed in this research study in which the ‘specified characteristics or dimensions’ (mentioned in the form of three statements) were identified in every news item and were coded accordingly.

Holsti (1969, p. 14) also argues that such ‘specified characteristics of messages’ should be identified ‘objectively and systematically’. An effort was also made in this research study that instead of placing an opinion on the overall news item (whether it was anti-bin Laden or pro-bin Laden etc.), the original statements made were collected, recorded and were put in the exact value of the identified variable.

Many researchers also claim that content analysis only looks at the ‘manifest’ meaning of the text rather than the ‘latent’ meaning of the text (Berger 2000, p. 117; Holsti 1969). Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998, p. 30) claim that it only deals with manifest content and ‘makes no claims beyond that’. It is obvious from the research question answered in the study that it hasn’t any inclination towards the latent meaning of the text and it only looks at the explicit meaning of the text, and thus this researcher believes that it is the best methodology to answer the mentioned research question.

Findings/ Discussion

The research findings have been presented below in two sections. The first section deals with the statements made about bin Laden in the public and private TV channels of Pakistan; while the second section debates the statements made about bin Laden in the selected print media outlets.

Statements made about the bin Laden in the Pakistani TV channels

The statements made about bin Laden in the stories will help us understand how bin Laden was represented in the Pakistani TV channels after he was killed in the Abbottabad

Operation. The data of first three statements, made in every news item, have been collected. Initially, the coding sheet containing the randomly selected 61 statements was used for the data collection. Once the data was collected and entered into the SPSS, then these 61 statements were later recoded into nine to have more holistic picture of the coverage. It must be noted that these statements have been made by anyone in the news items like: US officials, Pakistani officials, local people etc. The results can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1: First Three Statements Made About Osama bin Laden

Name of TV Channel	Bin Laden was responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent people across the world.	Bin Laden's death is an important development in WOT and good news to everyone.	Future of the War on Terror and region after his killing.	Response of the Al-Qaeda and Taliban to his death and the future of the organization (Al-Qaeda).	Controversies surrounding the bin Laden's life and death.	It is hard to believe that bin Laden was living in Abbottabad.	US should/ will present the proof of bin Laden's death.	Bin Laden was traced due to the blunder of one of his trusted guards.	No statement Made	Total
<i>Geo News</i>	23 3%	19 3%	6 1%	9 1%	5 1%	5 1%	4 1%	7 1%	570 88%	648 100%
<i>Dunya News</i>	13 2%	15 3%	4 1%	3 0.5%	2 0.3%	4 0.7%	1 0.1%	5 1%	505 91%	552 100%
<i>PTV News</i>	13 7%	14 7%	3 1.5%	6 3%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	153 81%	189 100%
Total	49	48	13	18	7	9	5	12	1228	1389

If we look at the coverage of *Geo News*, it reveals that mostly of the statements made are critical of bin Laden. The more frequently made statement made is that bin Laden was responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent people. Additionally, there are statements that equally cheer the death of bin Laden and term it a strategic milestone in the War on Terror. Despite of these anti Al-Qaida statements, the TV channel has equally tried to mention the response of Al Qaeda/ Taliban to his death. There are also statements made in the coverage that too tried to cast a doubt on his discovery in the garrison town – Abbottabad. There are also glimpses of pressure on U.S to release the picture of bin Laden. The findings show that *Geo News*, one of the popular TV channels of Pakistan, stayed critical of the bin Laden and criticized him in the coverage – despite giving little space to Taliban.

The coverage of *Dunya News* was also not much different from the *Geo News*. It too termed bin Laden the killer of thousands of innocent people in most of its statements besides declaring bin Laden's death as big success in the War on Terror. The TV channel

too provided space for the reactions of militant organizations about bin Laden's death. If we compare the coverage of both the private TV channels, it demonstrates that *Geo News* was more critical of him than *Dunya News*.

The coverage of *PTV News* was no more different than the coverage of *Geo News* and *Dunya News*. It too stayed critical of bin Laden by calling him the killer and terming his death important news. The TV channel also on aired the reaction of Al Qaeda/ Taliban to his death – but we didn't see any single statement that casts a doubt on his discovery in Abbottabad. It demonstrates that the Pakistani TV channels almost represented bin Laden in the similar way.

It was earlier debated that there were glimpses of sympathy among certain segments of society in Pakistan for bin Laden after his death – but the coverage of the Pakistani TV channels show that they were apparently not influenced by it. It further demonstrates that though the ruling government was not responsive on the issue (as they were not owning the operation or even taking the people in confidence) and even there was split in the allies of war on terror – but the Pakistani TV channels gave a similar sort of response to him after his death. The fear of repercussions from Taliban or other extremist organizations for not giving them the favorable coverage was also not apparent. It apparently shows that the Pakistani TV channels covered the incident independently without any fear.

First three statements made about the bin Laden in the print media outlets

This section debates the statements made about bin Laden in the print media outlets, selected in this research study, which includes *Dawn*, *The New York Times* and *Guardian*. The data has been collected on the basis of 61 random statements made about bin Laden in the sample. Once the data was collected and entered into the SPSS, then it was further recoded into nine statements. The aim is to understand the representation of bin Laden in the national and international print media outlets of those countries, which have remained the close allies in the War on Terror. Bin Laden was considered a threat by the US, UK and Pakistan. The top officials of these three countries accused him for orchestrating the attacks in their countries and even killing the civilians.

The findings of the first three statements have been recorded and it can be seen in the Table 2. Please note that these statements have been made by the different sources like: US officials, Pakistani officials, local people, Pakistani military etc.

From the findings below, in table 2, it is clear that *Dawn* was more concerned about the reaction of al-Qaida/ Taliban to bin Laden's death and to assess the future of the organization (al-Qaida) in his absence. It also demonstrates that they avoided putting pressure on the US to present the picture of bin Laden or to fan the controversies. The other dominant line discussed in the *Dawn*, about bin Laden, was calling him the murderer of thousands of innocent people rather than casting a doubt on his presence in Abbottabad. From this data, it is clear that *Dawn* gave a balanced coverage to bin Laden – besides staying critical of him.

Table 2: First Three Statements Made About Osama bin Laden in the Print Media Outlets

Newspaper	Bin Laden was responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent people across the world.	Bin Laden's death is an important development in WOT and good news to everyone.	Future of the War on Terror and region after his killing.	Response of the al-Qaida and Taliban to his death and the future of the organization (al-Qaida).	Controversies surrounding the bin Laden's life and death.	It is hard to believe that bin Laden was living in Abbottabad.	US should/ will present the proof of bin Laden's death.	Bin Laden was traced due to the blunder of one of his trusted guards.	No Statement Made	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	23 4%	8 1%	10 2%	25 4%	3 0.5%	2 0.3%	4 0.7%	6 1%	492 86%	573 100%
<i>The Guardian</i>	17 8%	11 5%	5 2%	12 6%	2 1%	2 1%	4 2%	8 4%	152 71%	213 100%
<i>The New York Times</i>	15 5%	15 5%	13 4%	22 7%	2 0.6%	2 0.6%	2 0.6%	4 1%	240 76%	315 100%
Total	55	34	28	59	7	6	10	18	884	1101

Guardian in its coverage of statements about bin Laden also hold him responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent people – besides calling his death as an important episode in the War on Terror and happy news. They equally highlighted the reaction of the Al Qaeda to his death and the future of the organization. It reveals that *Guardian*, like *Dawn*, also stayed critical of bin Laden after his death.

The coverage of *The New York Times* was no more different than *Dawn*. It highlighted the response and future of Al Qaeda after the death of its mastermind – besides staying happy over his death and calling him the murderer of innocent people across the globe. The newspaper equally debated the impact of his death on the future of ongoing War on Terror.

From the Table 2 (below), it is clear that almost all the three newspapers gave almost similar coverage to bin Laden after his killing. They highlighted the response of al-Qaida or Taliban to his killing, but they equally criticized him in the coverage by calling him either the killer of innocent people or by terming his death good news. Furthermore, the newspapers also avoided giving enough space to the speculations about the discovery of bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The findings also show that though the allies (Pakistan and US) were not on the same page after the operation, but their media outlets stayed united and were clear of their stand and thus they stayed critical of bin Laden. It further demonstrates that the protests, by certain conservative segments in Pakistan, also couldn't change the view of *Dawn* and other selected newspapers. Apparently, it seems that the selected newspapers debated the bin Laden after death in an independent way – without any fear of repercussions from the Taliban or al-Qaida.

Conclusion

This article attempted to determine the representation of bin Laden after his killing in the Abbottabad Operation in the Pakistani, British and American media outlets. The findings, based on the first three statements about the bin Laden, indicate that all the three TV channels of Pakistan, including the public and private broadcasters, stayed critical of bin Laden rather than friendly. Similarly, the findings also reveal that though the governments of Pakistan, U.S and UK were not on the same page after the operation; nevertheless, their (selected) print media outlets stayed united in criticizing the bin Laden after his killing in the Abbottabad Operation. Apparently, it also shows that all the selected media outlets covered his death in an independent way without any fear of repercussions from the establishment or Taliban. The media outlets of Pakistan need to be lauded more for their critical coverage, as the sympathetic feelings for bin Laden were on rise in the streets in Pakistan.

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