
**ANALYZING LETTERS-TO-THE-EDITOR SECTION
OF DAILY DAWN: A PAKISTANI ENGLISH NEWSPAPER**

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the “letters to the editor” section of daily Dawn, which is an oldest international English newspaper of Pakistan founded by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah the founder of Pakistan. Communication experts believe that the feedback is one of the key elements in the communication process. Thus, the print media uses ‘letter to the editor’ as a main source of feedback from readers. Scholars call it a public forum where readers can express their ideas and opinions. However, the other end of the issue again remains dark; as yet the selection process of the letters written to the editor to be published in the newspaper remains under the control of editors. And that process and criteria is not made public. Hence, to the best knowledge of the researcher, this study is a first effort of its kind in Pakistan to analyze the demographic and geographical identification of writers who contribute to ‘letter to editor section’ of the newspaper. For data collection letters to the editor pages of print version of newspaper Daily Dawn in English-language have been selected as a sample to be analyzed through quantitative content analysis for the period of one month – January 2015 arbitrarily. The one month data constituted a total of 282 letters and 29 issues of the newspaper. The data have been presented in tabular form and then is discussed and interpreted.

Keywords: Letter, Editor, Writer, Proportion, Feedback

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is supposed to be one of the key elements in communication; as without it the process of any communication is not complete. Regarding the feedback in print media, particularly in newspapers, letters written to the editors by readers with the wish to be published are an actualization of the feedback element in communication process created by the publishers. Because, Morris Janowitz (1952:9) is cited that publisher creates a communication intended for audience that does not just react to the communication

but also in some form itself starts communication back towards the communication originator (Weinhold W., 2010). In this way, this study is an analytical reflection about the letters written to the editor published in Daily Dawn, the oldest international English newspaper in Pakistan.

DEFINING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SECTION

Many scholars have researched about the letters section in newspapers. Like Buell, 1975; Volgy *et.al.*, 1977; Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992; and Hynds, 1994. So, Hynds (1994) is cited that letters section is among the most popular items read by newspaper audience (Wahl-Jorgensen K., 2010:69). Rather to say that the letters section has been described by various ways. As first, Habermas (1989) is cited that the letters-to-the-editor section is one of a few plate forms for public discussion by citizens, and could be an important institution of the public sphere (Wahl-Jorgensen K., 2010:69). Second, journalism scholars, journalists, and editors view that the letters section is an essential public forum to facilitate public discussion (Wahl-Jorgensen K., 2001:305). Third, it is said that the letters section morphs from a public forum into a public relations tool or, as some editors had narrative that it is a “customer service” (Wahl-Jorgensen K., 2001:312). Then said: it is a place for the stakeholders of community debates to offer their personal opinion and experiences (Wahl-Jorgensen K., 2001:314). Because it makes possible for readers to comment and express their views on different issues of collective interest; hence it can be deduced as a tool of public communication and debate (da Silva Marisa T., 2011:1). In addition, Hall *et.al.*, (1978:121) are cited that the letters’ section in newspapers is a demonstration of the sort of press that is open to various and alternative perspectives; and reflects the democratic image of the press as the ‘Fourth Estate’ (da Silva Marisa T., 2011:2). According to some other academic researchers, editors, and reporters letters-to-the-editor are a necessary forum for public debate (Richardson & Franklin, 2004:459). It facilitates the give-and-take of opinions, information and ideas between various groups of people (Passos, cited in Pillon, 2005:4) (da Silva Marisa T., 2011).

Reader expresses that letters forums were primarily sites for public dialogue in the democratic traditions, articulated specifically as ‘a place to share ideas’, ‘a place to debate issues’, ‘a way’ to allow

people to participate in the public dialogue', and 'hopefully, they serve the role of the old-fashioned New England town meeting'. Another idea, that letters forums provide a customer service, primarily in the sense of building rapport between readers and newspapers (Reader B., 2005). Thus overall letters to the editor section is a forum where readers can have debate over an issue, can express their opinions, give feedback to the editors etc. etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The letters page can be considered a public thermometer as (Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992) is cited; and the consensus among journalism scholars has been that letters are hazy reflections of public opinion (Grey & Brown, 1970:450), because letter writers are not representative of general population according to Wahl-Jorgensen K. (2010).

Small newspapers accept up to 80 per cent of the letters they receive, whereas large newspapers scrap a much larger proportion. Like New York Times, publishes less than 6 percent of the letters received (cf. Reader, 2001) (*Ibid*).

Most newspapers enforce a limit of 300 words on letters to the editors, as they may allow for the greatest number of individuals to voice their opinion. The demand for increasing the number of letters and decreasing the bulk of individual ones has grown stronger. As igniting debate is the editors' main objective (*Ibid*).

Owing to space constraints, editors hardly publish all of the letters they get. Hence, large circulation broadsheets publish only a small portion of the letters dispatch in by readers. Moreover, letters to editor pages cannot be deemed simple reflections of public opinion. Rather they are carefully constructed texts that frame public debates in particular ways (Hogan J., 2006).

Letters to the editor are precious means to improve feedback procedures for print media. They constitute a feedback opportunity for readers to express their personal opinions. Readership study shows that in all newspapers, the letters to the editor are widely read and highly valued. Moreover, letters to the editor reflect the public's opinion on all kinds of political, social and even personal problems and topics. This section remains the pre-eminent tool for feedback in the print media. In addition readers' letters supply the editors with interesting material. Whereas some of the letters may be part of a

orchestrated media campaign by certain organizations and interest groups (Raeymaekers K., 20005).

The large number of academic studies about reader's letters has found that letter writers tend to be older, better educated, wealthier, and more politically conservative than fellow newspaper readers who don't indulge in writing letters to their editor (Grey & Broqn, 1970; Renfro, 1970) cited in Richardson J. E. & Franklin B. (2004).

According to Nielsen editors insists that letters pages belong to individual readers, not to spokespeople of this or that organization engaged in signaling to each other, or pursuing free publicity (Nielsen K. 2010). However, demographic studies of letter writers indicate that most published letters have been written by people in middle to upper socio-economic classes (Grey & Brown, 1970; Reader *et.al.*, 2004; Rosenthal, 1969; Spark & Perez, 1991; Tarrant, 1957; Vacin, 1965; Wahl-Jorgensen, 1999) cited in Reader B. (2005).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to know the identification of the letters to the editor writers in daily Dawn an English newspaper.

Research question: Who are these letters to the editor writers: professionally, socially, society genderily, and geographically?

METHOD AND SAMPLING

Letters to the editor pages of one leading Pakistani international print version newspaper Daily Dawn English-language have been selected as a sample to be analyzed through quantitative content analysis for the period of one month – January 2015 arbitrarily. The one month data constituted a total of 282 letters and 29 newspaper issues of Daily Dawn.

FINDINGS

Demographic Identification of the Letter to the Editor Writers: By reviewing the letters in their printed version, it was found that in the sampled month of January 2015 total 282 letters were published in 29 issues of the newspaper. In this way, on average 10 letters were published in a day. Whereas the highest number of letters published in a day was 12 and the lowest was 8. Moreover, in the context of the number of writers of the letters it was found that

(99.3%) of the letters were written by a one writer; whereas, the remaining proportion (.7%) had been written by more than a one writer.

See table 1 that further mentions demographic information in the beginning that a typical letter writer of Daily Dawn was male (78.7%); however, it was surprising that the proportion of gender unidentified letter writers was higher (11.3%) than female (9.9%) letter writers. Then almost all published letters were written with names (97.9%) except little proportion (2.1%). Moreover, it was found that the majority of the published letters was without any type of initial put before them (84.0%). Just it was the proportion of 16.0% published letters that had initial before the name of the letter writer. Further, when the initials of the letter writers were analyzed microscope, then it was observed that out of the total of 45 two third proportions (66.7%) had civilian type initials. Whereas, the remaining proportion of one third (33.3%) had army related initials before their names. Finally, among the civilian initials the highest proportion (70.0%) was of the initial *Dr.* However, among the army initials the highest proportion was of the initial *Brig (r)*. Additionally, one another thing was observed common in both civilian and army type initials that all army related initials had r in the brackets (r) showing to be retired army man, whereas, among the civilian initials there was not any r in any initial showing to be retired.

TABLE-1**DEMOGRAPHIC IDENTIFICATION OF THE LETTERS TO EDITOR WRITERS**

| Variable | Number | Percentage % |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| GENDER | | |
| Male | 222 | 78.7 |
| Female | 28 | 9.9 |
| Unidentified | 32 | 11.3 |
| NAMED OR UNNAMED | | |
| With name | 276 | 97.9 |
| Without name | 6 | 2.1 |
| INITIAL STATUS | | |
| With initial | 45 | 16.0 |
| Without initial | 236 | 84.0 |
| INITIAL TYPE | | |
| Civilian | 30 | 66.7 |
| Army | 15 | 33.3 |
| CIVILIAN INITIAL | | |
| Dr | 21 | 70.0 |
| Prof | 2 | 6.7 |
| Hafiz | 1 | 3.3 |
| Sardar (Chief) | 1 | 3.3 |
| Engr. | 2 | 6.7 |
| Barrister | 3 | 10.0 |
| ARMY INITIAL | | |
| Cdre (r) | 1 | 6.7 |
| Maj (r) | 1 | 6.7 |
| Brig (r) | 6 | 40.0 |
| Cap (r) | 1 | 6.7 |
| Wg-Cdr (r) | 2 | 13.3 |
| Lt Col (r) | 3 | 20.0 |
| Lt Cdr (r) | 1 | 6.7 |

Source: Field work**Geographic Location Information of the Letter to the Editor**

Writers: See table 2 in the context of information regarding the letter to editor writers' geographic location. First, it was observed according to the table 2 that more than ninety per cent (94.0%) of the letter writers were national; whereas just the remaining little proportion of 6.0% was international. In other words, out of all 282 sampled letters,

just the proportion of 6.0% wrote letters from other various countries than Pakistan. Moreover, among those writers who wrote letters to editor from foreign countries the highest proportion was first, from USA (31.3%), then UK (25.0%) and Canada (25.0%).

TABLE-2
GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION INFORMATION OF THE
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR WRITERS

| Variable | Number | Percentage % |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| COUNTRY STATUS | | |
| National | 265 | 94.0 |
| International | 17 | 6.0 |
| NAME OF FOREIGN COUNTRY | | |
| USA | 5 | 31.3 |
| UK | 4 | 25.0 |
| Canada | 4 | 25.0 |
| India | 1 | 6.3 |
| Iraq | 1 | 6.3 |
| Bahrain | 1 | 6.3 |
| PROVINCE | | |
| Punjab | 113 | 42.6 |
| Sindh | 126 | 47.5 |
| Khyber-Pakhun-Khua | 16 | 6.0 |
| Baluchistan | 4 | 1.5 |
| Other | 6 | 2.3 |
| CITY STATUS | | |
| Capital | 199 | 76.0 |
| Non-capital | 61 | 24.0 |
| NAME OF THE CAPITAL CITY | | |
| Islamabad | 35 | 17.6 |
| Lahore | 47 | 23.6 |
| Karachi | 104 | 52.3 |
| Peshawar | 11 | 5.5 |
| Quetta | 2 | 1.0 |

Source: Field work

Additionally, those who wrote letters to editor from Pakistan among them nearly the proportion of fifty percent (47.5%) belonged to Sindh province, and the second highest proportion of more than two fifths (42.6%) belonged to Punjab province. Whereas, the rest belonged to the Khyber-Pakhtun-Khwa province (6.0%), the Baluchistan province (1.5%) and other (2.3%) which included Azad Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, FATA and PATA areas. Moreover, the analyzed data mentioned that the proportion of more than three quarters (76.0%) of the letter to editor writers belonged to any one of the five (Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta) capital city of the Pakistan. Whereas, on the contrary the proportion of 23.3% sampled letters to the editor writers belonged to the other than capital cities of Pakistan. In other words, capital cities received greatly higher representation than non-capital cities in the letter to editor section of daily Dawn newspaper, according to sampled data. Added to that, it was found that the capital city which got highest representation was Karachi (52.3%), then Lahore (23.6%), Islamabad (17.6%), Peshawar (5.5%) and lastly Quetta (1.0%). So such order of proportions speaks volumes itself about the procedure of the selection of letters to editor to be published in Daily *Dawn*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is said about the communication experts that they suppose to the feedback as one of the key elements in the communication process. In the print media, particularly in the newspapers, letters to the editor sections is a manifested form of feedback. The mass media researchers call to the letters to the editor section as a public forum where readers express their ideas, expressions, and opinions about any issue of public interest. However, the process of selecting letters to be published in the paper is both murky and subject to policy of the newspapers or editors; or rather to say newspaper owners specifically in the context of journalism culture in Pakistan. Because here in Pakistan such trend has long ago been established that newspaper owners, in the most cases, themselves become the editors. For this study all the letters of Daily *Dawn* newspaper published during the month of January 2015 were sampled to be analyzed. The total sampled letters stood 282 in the 29 issues of the said paper, on average publishing 10 letters in a day. In this way, according to the analyzed findings in table 1 and 2 the typical letter to editor writer of

Daily *Dawn* is male. Moreover, the typical letter writer identifies his name and geographic location. However, the typical Daily *Dawn* letter to editor writer does not use initial before his name; as according to the sampled analyzed data just 16.0% proportion used initials before their names. Further, it was also noticeable that the initials used were also two types: first civilian type, and second army type in descending order (For detail see Table-1). Additionally, the typical Daily *Dawn* letter to editor writer is geographically national; in other words hails from Pakistan. And in the context of province, he mostly belongs to Sindh province, then hails from Punjab province. The analyzed findings also mentioned that the typical Daily *Dawn* letter to editor writer hails from any of the five capital cities (Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta) of Pakistan. In other words in the letter to editor section of the Daily *Dawn* newspaper according the sampled data the readers of the Daily *Dawn* belonging to non-capital cities of Pakistan do not get proper representation or space to get their opinion, idea or feedback expressed as proportionately as those who hail from capital cities of Pakistan. So such findings do not make up democratic image of the letters to the editor section of the Daily *Dawn* which has been established by mass media research scholars about such sections of the newspapers. Rather it gives un-proportionately higher representation to the capital cities of the Pakistan than non-capital cities. And in the context of foreign countries the highest space is given to the writers hailing from USA and UK than other countries.

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