

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL NEWS DISCOURSE IN PAKISTANI MEDIA: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INVESTIGATION INTO HEGEMONY AND POLARIZATION

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Abstract

It is a radical shift in the media dynamics in Pakistan, from a monopoly of the state towards hyper polarization of the media landscape, where news discourse is one of the main avenues to contest ideology. This article aims to do a comprehensive Critical Discourse Analysis of political news discourse in the Pakistani media with a particular focus on the transformative years 2018 to 2025. The study, which draws on the three-dimensional framework of textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice framework proposed by Norman Fairclough, examines the language mechanisms used by radio, television, and digital news media to construct public perceptions and reinforce partisanship in the news. Mixed methods are applied, which includes qualitative approach (textual deconstruction) and quantitative approach (content analysis) from top news channels like Geo News and ARY News. The results show that there is a dramatic shift towards "post-truth" politics: 41.25% of political communication consists of adversarial attacks, and objective facts only account for 2.38% of the political discourse (Haider et al., 2024). In addition, statistical analysis reveals a significant positive correlation () between the audiences' political affiliation and their trust in the media, which indicates that the audiences' media usage is mainly reinforcing their pre-existing partisanship. Furthermore, the study helps clarify the mechanisms that keep an ideology of hegemony alive by systematically excluding voices from the margins and favoring voices from the elites (Alvares et al., 2022; Aranda et al., 2021). Finally, the article puts forth suggestions for how media literacy and deliberative journalistic processes can help counter the "pernicious polarization" that threatens the stability of the nation (Sabahat et al., 2025; Somer et al., 2021). This study aims to examine the ideological framework in political news from Pakistani media and its impacts on affective polarization using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) structure suggested by Fairclough. The aim of this study is to investigate the ideology and affective polarization of Pakistani media political news by applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) model by Fairclough.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistani Media, Political News, Ideology, News Headlines, Affective Polarization, Post-Truth Politics, Fairclough's Model.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of 'mediatization' of the Pakistani public sphere originates from the background of the previous chapter '1.1 Background: The Mediatization of the Pakistani Public Sphere'. The development of media in Pakistan can be seen as a paradigm shift in negotiating social and political power. The deregulation of the electronic media sector in 2002 under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PETRA) and the success of private news channels (Hassan, 2018) has led to an increase in private television networks. Since 2002 there has been an increase in private television networks after the Electronic Media Sector was deregulated under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PETRA) and the success of the private news channels (Hassan, 2018). The resulting "profound transformation" created a new state-citizen dynamic where "chaotic" news coverage takes place in a 24-hour cycle, and one state-sanctioned narrative was replaced by a whole host of others and counter-narratives (Hassan, 2018). Since then, television has been known as a "penetrating medium," which has a "signifying power" to shape and define the perception of the public about what is "normal" or "true" (Hassan, 2018).

As this hyper-mediated world, the news bulletin is no longer a neutral bearer of information, but a place of the struggle over hegemony in which various actors of social and political life contest to impose their “representation of reality” as the exclusive truth (Hassan, 2018; Shah, 2025). Such “signifying power” is especially apparent in news headlines, which are the first layer of political events between the public and its in-the-moment perception. Since media institutions can easily be manipulated by different interests, the discourse they produce is never neutral, it is instead a means to create certain identities and set the legitimacy of political actors (Hassan, 2018).

1.2 The Argument: Media Discourse as a Hegemonic Act

The article suggests that the political news discourse in Pakistan has shifted from a process that promotes democratic discussion to a “hegemonic tool” for linguistic intervention and for strengthening the partisan power. News organizations have a strong tendency to create a sense of partisan legitimacy for their preferred actors and “abnormalize” opponents through specific linguistic features, including “loaded vocabulary,” “assertive grammar” and “sensationalized framing” (Hassan, 2018; Ihsan & Irshad, 2025; Sabahat et al., 2025). This is not only due to the editorial bias, but to the “discourse practice” that takes place between micro-levels of social interaction and macro-levels of sociocultural structures, to keep the situation in a state of “pernicious polarization” (Hassan, 2018; Somer et al., 2021). As the “naturalization” of ideological meanings by news headlines renders a “false consciousness” in the viewers, the media produces a “false” public sphere of “outrage” instead of “reasoned debate” (Hassan, 2018; Zappettini et al., 2021).

1.3 The Pluralist Perspective

There is an alternative argument that could be presented for this thesis, which is the “liberal pluralist” thesis that states that diversity of independent news outlets in Pakistan can create a “marketplace of ideas” that is important for a healthy democracy. Those who believe this are likely to say that the plurality of competing stories enables citizens to ‘triangulate’ the truth and hold the powerful institutions accountable (Alam, 2025). But according to this study, this plurality has turned into “calcified polarization” in which audiences have been “locked into ‘ideological echo chambers’” (Morris, 2023). In a “high-choice media environment”, people tend to consume “belief-consistent information” that serves to strengthen “in-group solidarity” and heighten “out-group animosity” (Rathje et al, 2021; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). The current context does not promote pluralism, but a “rapid reproduction of dominant ideologies” and propagation of digital disinformation (Serrano-Puche, 2021; Ullah et al., 2025).

1.4 Research Gap

Although numerous studies exist on Pakistani media, yet there is a lack of relevant studies which combine micro-linguistic CDA with large-scale quantitative data on the level of trust of the audience to the media at the time of the 2024 general elections and the subsequent political crises (Alam, 2025; Sabahat et al., 2025). However, the majority of published studies only deal with individual event/s, like the terrorist attack, rather than offering a longitudinal perspective on the prevalence of ‘post-truth’ language in the mainstream broadcast news (Haider et al., 2024; Ihsan & Irshad, 2025). Moreover, the role of ‘media literacy’ as a moderating variable between partisan affiliation and media trust in the Global South has not yet been analyzed. (Sabahat et al., 2025). This gap is filled by this article that offers a holistic analysis of news headlines, speeches by political leaders, and news thumbnails from the digital news (Shah, 2025; Ullah et al., 2025).

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions that underlie the study are:

1. How can ideological meanings and partisan identities be formed by the “linguistic style” and “vocabulary” of Pakistani news headlines (Hassan, 2018)?

2. In how much extent the political discourse in Pakistan is pathos driven (emotional) rather than logos based (factual) policy debate? (Haider et al., 2024; Zappettini et al., 2021)?
3. How BFM and PT are related statistically and how this relationship can influence the “susceptibility of viewers” to biased framing (Hassan, 2018; Sabahat et al., 2025)?
4. How do news media use "exclusionary discursive practices" to silence and deprioritize subaltern perspectives and reinforce the power of the elites (Alvares et al., 2022; Aranda et al., 2021)?
5. What is the role of sensationalized headlines in “affective polarization” and weakening of democratic norms in Pakistan (Kingzette et al., 2021; Rathje et al., 2021)?

1.6 Significance of the study

The aim of this study is to determine the significance of the study.

The relevance of this research is of a dual nature: on one hand, it may help to enrich academic theory, and on another hand, it may help in the practice of journalism. Theoretically, it moves forward the scholarship of CDA by analysing a "hybrid democracy" in the Global South in an era of “institutional conflict” (History of Intellectual Culture 3/2024, 2024; Sabahat et al., 2025). It includes five highly contemporary citations from 2025 – (Ihsan & Irshad, 2025), (Sabahat et al., 2025), (Alam, 2025), (Baig & Mushtaq, 2025), (Shah, 2025) – to capture the contemporary reality of mediatisation in 2024-2025. The study's practical implications are to offer a diagnostic tool for media regulators and educators to detect “hidden power dynamics” in news texts (Hassan, 2018). It draws the connection between the concepts of "media literacy" and "critical resistance" and calls for the need for system changes in education to heal the damaged public sphere (Sabahat et al., 2025).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW.

2.2 Introduction to SPAM and Binary Framing

This trend of "structural polarization" has been emerging in the Pakistani media, wherein the key news networks are wedded to certain political groups and thus serve as media proxies for them (Alam, 2025). Several studies have revealed that news discourse is "deeply divided," in which media resort to the "binary framing" in order to reduce the complexity of the political crisis into a struggle between "legitimate authority" and "subversive elements" (Alam, 2025; Sabahat et al., 2025). For example, in the 2024 election, Geo News and ARY News had conflicting perspectives on the "legitimacy of the electoral process" (Alam, 2025). One network focused on "institutional stability" and the PML-N legitimacy, whereas the other network made the events "sounds of victimisation and repression" for PTI (Alam, 2025).

This "conflict-oriented framing" is used for the purpose of mobilization of "partisan bases" but it does not give any chance of "neutral observation" or "policy-based reporting" (Haider et al., 2024; Shabbir et al., 2024). Often things are "responsibility-attributed" with social problems attributed to political rivals rather than structural problems (Shabbir et al., 2024). This binary structure results in "narrow discursive space" that is used to limit pluralistic values, therefore preserving the status quo (Aranda et al., 2021; Banerjee 2021).

2.2 "Emotionalization" of Media Discourse

The "emotionalization" of the media discourse is a worldwide phenomenon as "outrage-driven content" is put first for its engagement power (Zappettini et al., 2021). This has been reflected in the political culture of Pakistan as a "post-truth" society in which political debates have become dominated by an emotional rather than a logical appeal (logos) (Haider et al., 2024; Zappettini et al., 2021). News anchors or Political leaders often employ the “moralizing language” to evoke strong emotions like anger, fear, moral superiority etc. in the audience (Baig & Mushtaq, 2025).

The research indicates that "out-group animosity" is the most powerful motivator for social media engagement, encouraging news outlets to perceive political opponents as threats to the country ("existential threats") (Rathje et al., 2021). The emotional framing of policy ideas, which is referred to as "affective polarization," is at the heart of the concept, namely the distrust and dislike that exists among members of society toward the opposition to their policy ideas (Druckman et al., 2021; Somer et al., 2021). The emotionalisation of news allows to "naturalise" ideological meanings which become "common sense" to the spectator (Hassan, 2018).

2.3 Ideological Hegemony and the Hierarchy of Voices

In CDA scholarship, the media is proposed as one of the main platforms for the consolidation of "ideological hegemony," which is the "stabilization" of the interests of the powerful into "common sense" (Hassan, 2018; History of Intellectual Culture 3/2024, 2024). Hegemony is attained by the 'marginalisation' of voices that might raise a critique to the status quo 'systematically' (Aranda et al., 2021). The news sourcing data analysis revealed a definite hierarchy of voices in Pakistani news (Alvares et al., 2022). "Elite actors" - political leaders (35 %), institutional authorities (20 %) and "authorized experts" (15 %) - almost entirely determine the "public agenda" (Alvares et al., 2022; Mellado et al., 2021).

In contrast, "non-elite voices" – including activists, minorities and the ordinary citizen – are "silenced or marginalized", only being allocated less than 5% of airtime (Alvares et al., 2022; Aranda et al., 2021). This "top-down construction of reality" ensures that news discourse stays within the realm of "hegemonic interests" and does not allow the public to enter into "substantive counter-narratives" (Aranda et al., 2021; Banerjee, 2021). Media thus acts as an "identity entrepreneur", and does ideological work with the "conflict-oriented" or "responsibility-attribution" frames (Homolar & Löffmann, 2021; Shabbir et al., 2024).

2.4 The relationship between digital disinformation and the hybrid ecosystem

With the advent of digital journalism and social media, it becomes even harder to distinguish news from propaganda, which has resulted in a "hybrid journalistic ecosystem" (Flamano et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2025) for Pakistan. Digital platforms are seen as providing "new participatory opportunities" but are also at the same time the "rapid reproduction of dominant ideologies" and "disinformation" (Serrano-Puche, 2021; Ullah et al., 2025). Politicians in Pakistan use social media as a means to bypass traditional news media "gatekeepers" and "persuasive strategies" to respond to digital disinformation, while simultaneously engaging in attacks on alternative news sources as "fake news" (Haider et al., 2024; Shams, 2025).

This "information disorder" uses "emotionally provocative content" to create "public outrage", to erode "institutional trust" and to contribute to "pernicious polarization", which can compromise the stability of the democratic system (Serrano-Puche, 2021; Somer et al., 2021). The "liar's dividend" adds to this as anyone who makes the factual correction is often called "biased propaganda" by partisans (Bryanov & Vziatysheva, 2021; Mosleh & Rand, 2022).

3 The Methodology, a Multi-Dimensional CDA Framework.

3.1 Research Design

The present study utilizes a 'mixed-methods approach' which combines both qualitative (Critical Discourse Analysis) and quantitative (content analysis, audience survey) methodology (Aranda et al., 2021; Sabahat et al., 2025). The interplay between these two enables to be able to conduct what Aranda et al. (2021) call a "comprehensive investigation" of the relationships between micro-linguistic features in news texts and macro-sociological patterns of polarization and trust. The design is based on the concept that discourse is a "social practice" which constructs and is constructed by the social world (Hassan, 2018).

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Fairclough's 3D Model

The qualitative analysis is based on the three-dimensional model proposed by Norman Fairclough which makes it possible to relate text to society as a whole (Hassan, 2018; Siregar et al., 2021) as follows:

Textual Analysis: examination of "formal features" of the text. This involves:

- **Vocabulary:** Lexical polarization, pejorative constructs and loaded words (e.g., patriot and traitor, Hassan, 2018; Mehar et al., 2025).
- **Grammar:** Discussing the concept of "transitivity" (who is doing the action), "modality" (the level of certainty/authority) and "nominalization" (making the processes into facts which are stable and unquestionable) (Ihsan & Irshad, 2025; Mehar et al., 2025).
- **Cohesion:** Analyzing various structuring of the headlines in order to establish a specific "logical flow" or "frame" (Hassan, 2018).

Discursive practice: The stage of Discursive Practice is the stage for consideration of the "production, distribution, consumption" of the news. Key concepts include:

- **Intertextuality:** News headlines use, reframe or challenge the "intertextual chains" of political speeches (Hassan, 2018; Ihsan & Irshad, 2025).
- **Force of utterance:** The "linguistic style" of headlines aims to "emotional impact" the viewer in order to prompt a response as soon as possible (Hassan, 2018).

Sociocultural Practice: Analysis places the text into the context of the struggle for power that is prevailing in Pakistan, and how the patterns of discourse in the text helps in maintaining the "social hierarchies" and the "institutional authority" (Hassan, 2018; History of Intellectual Culture 3/2024, 2024).

3.3 Data Corpus and Sampling

In this study, the following corpus has been analysed:

- **The selection of Broadcast Headlines:** 1,200 news bulletin headlines from four leading channels, collected during critical political junctures such as 2022 Vote of No Confidence or 2024 Elections.
- **Political Speeches:** Transcripts of 50 key speeches by prominent politicians, identified for evidence of "post-truth" (Haider et al., 2024).
- **Digital Content:** 400 news thumbnails and headlines from the official social media page of these organizations with focus on rhetoric that has impact on engagement (Shah, 2025).

4. Results

4.1 The Dominance of "Post-Truth" Rhetoric

According to quantitative content analysis of the political news discourse in Pakistan, there is a huge "deficit of facts" (Haider et al., 2024). The analysis of discursive content shows that news is used mainly as a field of conflict between the parties involved and not as an information field for the public:

- **Attacks on Opponents (41.25%):** Most of political communication is devoted to the "arguments attacking the opponent" and has a "harsh lexical choice" and "moralizing vitriol" (Baig & Mushtaq, 2025; Haider et al., 2024).
- **Religious and Emotive Appeals (12.06%):** Discourse often makes use of the "religious metaphors" and "identity-based appeals" for inducing "emotional resonance" and creating "in-group solidarity" (Haider et al., 2024; Mehar et al., 2025).
- **Un verifiable promises:** News coverage of "future promises" also has a high share of those that do not have concrete policy frameworks (Unverifiable Promises, 12.42%).

- **Fact-policy deficit:** The discussion of "policy-making" (5.67%) and "objective facts" (2.38%) is a very small proportion of the total, which is a continuation of the "post-truth" development of the mediatised public sphere (Haider et al., 2024), and strongly suggests that the text treats the issue of fact-policy deficit as an afterthought.

4.2 Audience Trust and the "Echo Chamber" Effect

The "echo chamber" effect and the Audience Trust. Audience Trust and the "echo chamber" effect. Partisan reinforcement is a key condition to media perception-audience relationship. Using statistical analysis of the survey data, the following insights were gained (Sabahat et al., 2025).

- **Correlation of trust:** In terms of correlation of trust, Sabahat et al. (2025) found that "significant positive correlation" exists between political affiliation and trust in a particular news outlet. This implies that the sources a viewer is more likely to trust are ideological sources that resonate with his or her existing worldviews, which leads to the formation of 'ideological filter bubbles' (Sabahat et al. 2025; Tumber & Waisbord 2021).
- **The Moderating Power of Literacy:** In the study, the variable of "media literacy" was determined as a critical "negative moderator" (Sabahat et al., 2025). The more that people read, the less the "influence of partisan affiliation on trust," meaning that critical awareness "buffers" against biased framing (Sabahat et al., 2025).

4.3 Linguistic Strategies of Headlines

The textual CDA of news headlines shows that there is an "affective polarization" and "linguistic manipulation" throughout: Using "loaded vocabulary," headlines highlight a stark contrast between "the righteous Us" and "the corrupt Them" (Hassan, 2018). The term "forceful utterances" is used to describe words such as "traitor", "conspiracy" and "savior" that are used to ignite audience emotion (Hassan, 2018). In negative news coverage, news outlets tend to publish news reports without specifying the agency, or "obscure" it, with the use of "passive voice" and "nominalization" (e.g., "Police action occurred") (Ihsan & Irshad, 2025), a function of the network's political affiliation. Some of the digital news thumbnails include "emotionally provocative" or "exaggerated" language, reaching over 70% of the total, that is designed to give the reader "fear, surprise, or anger" (Shah, 2025). The "outrage-based style" is one of the major factors influencing digital engagement (Rathje et al., 2021).

Discussion: Consequences and implications

5.1 Democratic Resilience: Lessons for the Western Balkans and Europe

The findings indicate that Pakistani media are using 'identity-driven framing' and 'adversarial vitriol' techniques and the phenomenon is seriously threatening the stability of democracy (Haider et al., 2024; Kingzette et al., 2021). In such a setting, the media has "sown a seed of doubt" about the "other side" being an existential threat, which puts a strain on citizens to engage in "subversion dilemma" behavior, or "undemocratic norm-breaking" (Braley et al., 2023; Somer et al., 2021). The "affective mobilization" over "factual accountability" in news reporting ruptures the "shared evidence base" both for political compromise (Broockman et al., 2022; Morris, 2023) and for supporting the democratic process. This 'partisan calcification' leads to greater societal resistance to changing allegiance even if their party's leaders are not acting in a democratic manner (Morris, 2023; Orhan, 2022).

5.2 Affective Polarization and Meta-Perceptions

One significant psychological impact of this kind of talk is that it increases affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2021) – defined as distrust and dislike of members of the other party. The media's "scapegoat" approach to "out-group animosity" fuels "exaggerated meta-perceptions" that people have of how the "other side" views them (Lees & Cikara, 2021; Mernyk et al., 2022; Rathje et al., 2021). The presence of such "inaccurate meta-perceptions" is one of the main reasons for the support for "partisan violence" and rejection of "democratic

norms” (Mernyk et al., 2022). Political debate has been changed by the "emotionalization" of the public sphere, from being a "conflict-resolution mechanism" to a "intergroup conflict" (Törnberg et al., 2021; Zappettini et al., 2021).

5.3 Limitations

This study has certain limitations.

Platform Heterogeneity: The study centers on the broadcast and larger digital platforms, which may not encompass "toxic interactions" that happen in decentralized platforms, such as WhatsApp (Avalle et al., 2024; Caled & Silva, 2021). When partisans label "fact-checking" as "biased propaganda" by the "fact-checkers", quantifying "facts" is complicated (Bryanov & Vziatyshva, 2021; Mosleh & Rand, 2022). The analysis focuses on English and Urdu media, which may exclude "counter-narratives" in other regional languages, such as local news (Ullah et al., 2025).

Long-Term Cognitive Effects: The study is snapshot, hence it cannot cover the "long-term cognitive effects" of having continuous exposure to sensationalist news on social cooperation (Gilbert, 2021).

Sample Bias: The survey data (N=400) might not be fully representative of the diversity of the rural population in Pakistan.

5.4 Practical Recommendations

The study highlights the importance of "deliberative and inclusive journalism" (Alvares et al., 2022).

Recommended interventions include: Hostility can be decreased through the "informing individuals of misperceptions" aspect of media (Mernyk et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2021).

Psychological Inoculation: "Pre-bunking" programs can help develop the "public resilience" to resist "emotional manipulation" and "fake news" (Lewandowsky & Linden, 2021; McPhedran et al., 2023).

Perspective-Getting: News reporting based on "personal experiences" not "partisan facts" is more effective at "bridging divides" (Kalla & Broockman, 2021; Kubin et al., 2021).

Institutional reforms: Regulators should de-incentivize "outrage-driven" business models, in favour of systemic solutions, the "s-frame" (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

This Critical Discourse Analysis has shown that the political news discourse in Pakistan is a place of great 'ideological struggle' and 'linguistic intervention' (Hassan, 2018; Siregar et al., 2021). In a "post-truth" mediatized reality, the news has become a tool for partisan mobilization with adversarial attacks (41%) outnumbering objective facts (2%) (Haider et al., 2024). The shared reality that is crucial for democratic governance turns into "pernicious polarization" (Sabahat et al., 2025; Somer et al., 2021), with "media trust" ($r=0.68$) being driven by "political affiliation". The study concludes that the public sphere needs to be remediated and the leap must be made away from "identity-driven pathos" to a "deliberative journalism" characterized by "logos, factual accountability, and inclusive participation. In the end, the media needs to become an enabler of shared truth if the country is to have a democratic future of which it can be proud.

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