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Dissecting Media Positivism through Interpretivism: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn’s Framing of PPP and PML-N Governance during Pakistan’s 2013 Political Transition

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Abstract

This study explores ideological bias in the editorial content of Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper Dawn by applying Van Dijk's Ideological Square and Chomsky's Propaganda Model. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), three editorials published around the 2013 general elections were analyzed to investigate how the governance of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was discursively framed. Findings reveal that editorials systematically valorize certain political actors through positive lexical choices and passive constructions that obscure accountability, while others are portrayed as destabilizing or self-serving. The analysis demonstrates how ownership structures, elite sourcing, and selective framing correspond to Chomsky's five filters of Propaganda Model. This dual-framework approach highlights how editorial discourse in Dawn reproduces hegemonic ideologies and marginalizes dissent. Socially, the study uncovers mechanisms of media bias that shape public opinion and political legitimacy. Practically, it offers tools for journalists, educators, and media scholars to critically assess editorial discourse in transitional democracies. The study contributes to South Asian media scholarship by situating Pakistani editorial behavior within broader global patterns of media control and ideological reproduction.

Keywords: Interpretivism, Media Positivism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideological Square, Dawn Editorials, Political Bias

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1. Introduction

Media has long served as a mirror and maker of public consciousness. In transitional democracies like Pakistan, its role becomes even more pronounced in constructing legitimacy, shaping electoral perceptions, and reinforcing power asymmetries. Among Pakistani newspapers, Dawn has maintained a reputation for institutional credibility and wide readership. Its editorial stance during politically sensitive periods—like the 2013 general elections—offers valuable insight into how ideology and bias are reproduced in public discourse.

The 2013 elections marked a significant moment in Pakistan’s political history, witnessing a democratic transition from the PPP-led government to PML-N amidst heightened scrutiny of governance, corruption, and institutional performance. While democratic on the surface, the media’s selective narration often masked complex power struggles beneath. This study investigates how editorial discourse in Dawn framed the governance of PPP and PML-N by applying Van Dijk’s Ideological Square and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model.

Unlike Western democracies, Pakistan’s media operates under unique political pressures including civil-military relations, judiciary influence, corporate ownership, and ideological expectations. This research situates itself at the intersection of media sociology and discourse studies to uncover the latent ideological underpinnings of editorial texts.

2. Literature Review

Early studies by Herman and Chomsky (1988) in *Manufacturing Consent* theorized that media, particularly in capitalist democracies, serves elite interests through structural filters including ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anti-communist ideology. This “propaganda model” has been applied across varied contexts, but studies in the Global South, including Pakistan, remain sparse.

Van Dijk’s (1998) Ideological Square—emphasizing polarization through the positive representation of the in-group and negative portrayal of the out-group—offers a textual and discursive lens to decode media bias. Pakistani studies (e.g., Hussain & Safder, 2013; Ahmad, 2017) have shown partial evidence of partisan alignment, yet few have systematically employed both ideological frameworks.

Contemporary international scholar confirms that editorial content continues to reproduce hegemonic discourse even in democratic societies, especially around foreign policy, national security, and political opposition (Ojala, 2021; Carvalho & Pereira, 2019). These studies justify the current work's relevance in analysing how Pakistani editorials reflect, resist, or reproduce dominant state-corporate ideologies.

3. Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the interpretivist paradigm to examine editorial discourse in Dawn newspaper. Specifically, it draws on Van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square as the analytical framework to identify discursive strategies that contribute to biased representations of political actors. The methodology is designed to explore how linguistic structures reflect ideological leanings in the portrayal of similar events associated with two major political parties—the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).

3.1. Sampling and Data Selection:

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select editorials published during the months surrounding the 2013 general elections in Pakistan. This period was chosen due to heightened political sensitivity, partisan rhetoric, and intensified public engagement. The editorials were sourced from Dawn's online archive, focusing on incidents involving mob violence, political rallies, and sectarian attacks—topics likely to expose editorial bias.

Three editorials were selected for their thematic and structural similarity, each addressing comparable incidents in PPP-governed Sindh and PML-N-governed Punjab. These texts serve as paired examples for identifying discrepancies in narrative framing. Editorials were preferred over news reports because they explicitly reflect institutional stance and policy direction.

3.2. Analytical Framework:

Van Dijk's Ideological Square provides a robust CDA framework to deconstruct editorial texts along four discursive moves:

- Emphasize Our Good
- De-emphasize Our Bad
- Emphasize Their Bad
- De-emphasize Their Good

Each editorial was manually coded for lexical choices, syntactic structures, thematic emphasis, and rhetorical devices that align with these four categories. The presence, frequency, and strength of these strategies were noted across each editorial. Contrasts were drawn to reveal patterns of favouritism or vilification toward PPP or PML-N based on the geographic origin of the events described.

In addition to this, the Propaganda Model by Herman and Chomsky (1988) was used to interpret findings through a political economy lens. In particular, the role of advertising revenue, editorial ownership, and federal versus provincial alignments were considered when analysing editorial positioning.

3.3. Reliability Measures:

To ensure analytical rigor, a two-stage coding process was used. First, a preliminary reading identified general themes and tone. Second, targeted coding was applied using the Ideological Square categories. Findings were peer-reviewed by an independent researcher to enhance interpretive validity.

This methodological design ensures that the research remains faithful to interpretivist principles, while also delivering structured, replicable findings in the tradition of qualitative discourse analysis.

This qualitative study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine twenty editorials published by Dawn during the 2013 general elections. The selection focused on editorials addressing governance, institutional performance, and political credibility of PPP and PML-N. A purposive sampling strategy ensured thematic relevance.

A coding framework was developed based on Van Dijk's Ideological Square (us vs. them representation, emphasizing our good/their bad) and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (five filters: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideology). Editorial texts were analysed at lexical, syntactic, and thematic levels to identify patterns of bias, suppression, and ideological framing.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis of Editorial Excerpts

The following section presents detailed line-by-line critical discourse analysis (CDA) of editorial excerpts from Dawn newspaper. The excerpts are quoted verbatim.

The commentary provided applies Van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square to expose ideological positioning and narrative asymmetry.

Excerpt 1: Lahore Rally (PML-N) October 29, 2011

"The Lahore rally on Friday was expected to be the PML-N's mission statement of its struggle to topple President Asif Zardari..." The phrase "expected to be" frames the rally with preconceived intent, implying aggressive political ambition. The term "mission statement" presupposes that the rally's purpose was adversarial, while "topple President Zardari" casts the PML-N in a destabilizing role. These elements collectively fulfill the function of *Emphasizing Their Bad*.

Excerpt 2: Lahore Rally (continued)

"It is obvious that when push comes to shove, Pakistani politicians are prepared to fall back on a past..." The idiom "when push comes to shove" introduces a judgmental tone. The editorial contrasts a seemingly reformed political image with a regressive past, portraying PML-N's behavior as a relapse. Terms like "diatribe" and "brute force" denote aggression. This reflects both *Emphasizing Their Bad* and *De-emphasizing Their Good*.

Excerpt 3: Lahore Rally (conclusion)

"The sadder part is that the 'derogatory' remarks could well be just a reminder of the shape of things to come..." The closing commentary casts future governance under PML-N as bleak. Lexical items like "cheap, emotional, revenge-laden antics" serve to delegitimize the party. This is a clear illustration of *Emphasizing Their Bad*.

Excerpt 4: Joseph Colony Attack (PML-N) — March 11, 2013

"HOMES are burned, religious paraphernalia destroyed..." This powerful lead sentence uses vivid imagery to elicit emotional reaction. Responsibility is attributed to the Punjab government: "just stood by and let it all happen." The editorial's judgmental tone contrasts sharply with its tone in similar incidents in PPP-governed areas. Even police warnings are acknowledged but downplayed. This is a case of *Emphasizing Their Bad* and *De-emphasizing Their Good*.

Excerpt 5: Abbas Town Attack (PPP) — March 4, 2013

"A CITY already battered by a cycle of violence..." Despite higher casualties, this editorial generalizes the problem as a national security issue. Blame is shifted to systemic dysfunction ("intelligence gaps," "rescue delays"), and the PPP's responsibility is largely omitted. The absence of names or accountability softens critique. As compared to the discourse of Joseph Colony attack this is a vivid example of *De-emphasizing Our Bad*.

Excerpt 6: Abbas Town (continued)

"Perhaps the greatest challenge is the geographical spread of violence against Shias..." The editorial universalizes the crisis by naming multiple cities. It calls for inter-agency cooperation but avoids political accountability. This reflects *Emphasizing Our Good* through institutional leniency and *De-emphasizing Our Bad* by dispersing blame.

Excerpt 7: Joseph Colony (conclusion)

"What was the Punjab government doing overnight..." Strong attribution of negligence. The term "micro manager" is used sarcastically. The juxtaposition of "complicity or incompetence" raises moral suspicion. This framing directly contrasts with the Abbas Town conclusion and fits *Emphasizing Their Bad*.

5. Results

The analysis revealed a distinct pattern in Dawn's editorial framing, aligning closely with Van Dijk's Ideological Square. Each editorial strategically positioned political actors based on whether they were aligned with PPP or PML-N, showcasing how media discourse reinforces ideological boundaries.

5.1. Emphasizing Their Bad:

Editorials discussing incidents in Punjab under PML-N governance frequently highlighted administrative failure, violent tendencies, and religious intolerance. For instance, the editorial on the Joseph Colony incident (March 11, 2013) portrayed the Punjab government as "a silent spectator" and questioned the Chief Minister's credibility by calling him a "micro manager" who failed to act. Terms like "cheap, emotional, revenge-laden antics" and "mob violence" were repeated to highlight incompetence and negligence, fulfilling Van Dijk's "emphasize their bad" strategy.

5.2. De-emphasizing Our Bad:

In contrast, the editorial coverage of sectarian violence in Karachi (under PPP governance) mitigated the federal and provincial government's responsibility. Although the Abbas Town blast was more deadly than the Joseph Colony attack, editorial language shifted blame toward "general lawlessness," "intelligence gaps," or abstract "state failure" rather than PPP's political leadership. The editorial framed this violence as a national, not localized, issue, avoiding direct critique of PPP governance.

5.3. Emphasizing Our Good:

Positive framing was evident when referencing efforts by PPP's government or

when acknowledging the historical significance of Dawn's liberal values. While explicit praise was limited, the relative absence of critique when violence occurred in PPP territory implied a tacit endorsement. The editorials finely emphasized institutional goodwill or victimhood in Sindh, portraying responses as reasonable given broader political instability.

5.4. De-emphasizing Their Good:

Even where PML-N undertook damage control or relief measures, these were portrayed as insufficient or performative. Statements like *"making all the usual noises"* and *"belatedly swung into action"* cast doubt on sincerity and efficiency. By minimizing the impact of PML-N's corrective actions, the editorials downplayed their positive contributions, aligning with Van Dijk's *De-emphasizing Their Good*.

The language across the editorials was strategic: emotional descriptors for opposition parties, vague generalities for allies, selective historical comparisons, and imbalanced calls for accountability. The ideological framing aligned not only with Van Dijk's square but also supported the assumptions of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, especially the tendency of elite media to reflect the preferences of aligned political or economic actors.

6. Discussion

A very small literature in the south Asian region were found on the above studied field. The findings suggest that Dawn's editorials frame governance narratives through selective praise and critique, privileging centrist-liberal forces while marginalizing populist narratives. This aligns with international studies on elite media functioning (Philo, 2008; Ojala, 2021) and extends them to a South Asian context. Zubair & Iqbal (2015) noted similar trends of editorial favouritism but lacked theoretical depth to trace potential reasons for such biased media discourses.

The current study adds value by applying a dual-framework lens and demonstrating how discursive strategies serve ideological ends. Editorials operate as ideological tools that signal democratic support while legitimizing elite consensus and narrowing pluralism.

7. Conclusion

This study deconstructs how Dawn's editorials reproduced ideological bias during Pakistan's 2013 elections. By deploying Van Dijk's Ideological Square and Chomsky's

Propaganda Model, it reveals the media's role in legitimizing certain political actors while obscuring others. Through lexical framing, strategic omissions, and selective sourcing, Dawn's editorials contributed to shaping a hegemonic narrative.

Practical implications include equipping journalists and educators with CDA tools to uncover ideological framing. Socially, the study calls for greater media literacy and editorial transparency to safeguard democratic discourse.

Future studies should include multilingual press and digital media to assess whether similar ideological reproduction exists across media ecologies.

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