

# Examining the Coverage of Terrorist Activities in Afghanistan's Media: A Case study of TOLONews

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**Abstract**— The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the reporting of terrorist activities by TOLONews in Afghanistan. Media is considered to be the best tool for influencing public opinion and leading the people's minds to a particular viewpoint. So, in a post-war country like Afghanistan which is suffering from terrorism, it is significant for mass media to be cautious in reporting terrorist activities. By executing content analysis of thirty news stories it could be discerned that TOLONews lacks professionalism in reporting terrorism activities. The findings further suggest that TOLONews is incompetent in being a socially responsible media outlet in a developing country like Afghanistan. Inaccurate and sensitive headlines, too short leads and illusory background information are the main problems in the news reported by TOLONews.

**Keywords**—TOLONews, Afghanistan, Media, terrorism, terrorism reporting, media neutrally

## I. INTRODUCTION

Everyday people receive information through mass media like newspaper, radio, television and internet. Mass media influence people in the decision-making process and shape their perceptions about events and happenings around them.

It is needless to say that nowadays, the mass media play a significant role in every aspect of our life and people learn the way of life, social activities, habits and issues in the society through mass media. Mass media has great power in shaping public opinion on any event, occurred in international, regional, national and local levels. The main primary significance of this study is to answer the question "How media reports terrorist activities in Afghanistan?"

Although, this study is a case base study on the TOLONews website but it can help the readers to obtain a big picture of the coverage of terrorism by mass media in Afghanistan. Given that the TOLONews is a mass medium owned and run by Afghans, who are directly suffering from terrorism, the study shall certainly contribute to the literature on media and terrorism.

TOLONews is Afghanistan's first 24/7 news channel, owned by MOBY Group which has launched in 2010. Its sister channels are TOLO TV and LEMAR TV in Afghanistan. TOLONews has a news website of the same name. In this paper, the phrase TOLONews stands for the website of TOLONews, not the TV channel.

This study will also help the researchers who are interested in media research in Afghanistan as the existing literature in the field of media in Afghanistan is not suffice to have an insight into media landscape of the country.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Given the skewed amount of literature existing on chosen are of research, this study apparently becomes the first attempt by an internal investigator to investigate the coverage and reporting of terrorist activities in the Afghan media.

Prior to this, Mohammad Arif Anwari conducted his research entitled "Framing of war news in Afghanistan's Media: A comparative content analysis of TOLO TV and BBC TV". (Anwari, 2018)

The main focus of his study was on analyzing the differences and similarities in war reporting of national (TOLO TV) and international (BBC TV) media. Although he attempted to analyze the war news framing by TOLO and BBC television but apparently the findings indicate that the main focus of the study was on the comparison and not on framing analysis of war news. (Anwari, 2018)

Griffin in his research "Picturing America's War on Terrorism 'in Afghanistan and Iraq'" says that coverage of the terrorism is not completely independent and impartial. He writes: "News-magazine photographs primarily serve established narrative themes within official discourse: that published photographs most often offer prompts for prevailing government versions of events and rarely contribute independent, news or unique visual information." (Griffin, 2004, p. 381)

Jasperson and El-Kikhia (2003), in their comparative research, entitled "CNN and al Jazeera's Media Coverage of America's War in Afghanistan" analyzed the information based on the three frames; governance frames, military frames and humanitarian frames. The research was designed very well and focused on the framing of wartime news coverage from both regions of the conflict in the Afghanistan. (E. Jasperson and O. El-kikhia, 2003)

It is obvious that the coverage of war news on terrorism in international media is very different from the coverage by a national media. Because, for an international media like CNN and Aljazeera, the war news from Afghanistan might be similar in importance to the war news from a country like Iraq so, the influence of the framing is limited on Afghanistan's people. But the framing and nature of coverage by an Afghanistan based television is extremely influential on the people of Afghanistan, given the news value of 'proximity'. In this case, analyzing the coverage of terrorism in Afghanistan's media is needed (Tunez and Guevara, 2009) (Túñez & Guevara, 2009)

Apparently, there are many more studies of international media coverage of the Afghan war by international researchers, however, the native literature on the chosen

filed is limited and thus the existing gap forms the main incentive for conducting this research.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Of all the developed theories on media influence, the two most well-known media theories are the Agenda setting theory of Mass Media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and framing theory (Goffman, 1974). However, agenda setting theory formed the main theoretical framework for the present study as the theory is directly oriented towards mass media and is suffice for the study undertaken. According to the agenda setting theory, the media not only tells what to think but also how to think about an issue. Agenda setting affects the content of media messages. Internal and external agents of media institutions not only select media content but also have the ability to change people's perceptions, organize and shape their thoughts through the manipulation of message content. According to the theory, agenda setting happens in two stages. In the first stage, media creates object salience by choosing and filtering the most important events to form news, and in the next stage, attribute agenda setting happens wherein only certain specific facts and figures are revealed while covering the filtered event (Mehdizadeh, 2014, p. 36) (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

### IV. METHODOLOGY

The content analysis research method is applied in the present study. Although there are many definitions of content analysis, the simplest definition might be the following definition which is given by Walizer and Wienir (19870):

“The Content analysis is as any systematic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information”. (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011, p. 156)

The data have been collected during a six-month time period started from July, 2018 and lasted to December, 2018. During this time the TOLONews website posted about 269 news related to terrorism activities in Afghanistan.

A total of 30 news was selected using simple random sample method from total population 269. Every news is analysed based on the three main elements in the news structure which can be representing the whole news meaning. These three elements are headline, lead and information background. Usually, media put the most important elements of the news in the headlines and leads, and to add their personal or organizational viewpoints, they add some related information which is called background information.

Covering of terrorism activities is similar to reporting war, because both are involved with violence and casualties. As Allan and Zelizer say: “war reporting in short, demands what notions of constitutes good journalistic practice be realigned on the basis of different criteria than would typically seem appropriate, criteria thrown into sharp relief – at times violently so – by challenging circumstances.” (Allan and Zelizer , 2004, p. 4)

## V. UNITS OF ANALYSIS

### 1) *Headline*

Studies of online news readers indicate that they are attracted by headlines and brief summaries and will read a short piece. (Mencher, 2011, p. 133)

The headline is usually chosen from the most important and interesting part of the news. Choosing a headline to help us understand that in the case of a similar story, does the perceptions of both media are the same or different in importance and significance.

### 2) *Lead*

News related to terrorism activities come under the hard news category. So, hard-news lead which is also called summary lead, summarizes in the first sentence what the story is about. A hard-news lead is usually only one sentence or two at most. (Rich, 2010, p. 132)

Based on the style of the inverted pyramid, which is the current and popular style of news writing in Afghanistan, the most important part of the news comes in the lead. The reporter or the media institutions are trying to set what is important in the lead. Two points are important to be kept in mind while analyzing the lead; Firstly, professional and neutral media see the news from an audience perspective and put the most important part of the news in the lead. So, here the lead contains the significant points of the news.

Secondly, some media see the news from their political, social and economic viewpoints. So, the information in the lead of the news does not necessarily mean that the information is really the most important part of the news.

### 3) *Background Information*

The background information has a dual function in the news. Sometimes it makes the audience fully aware of the news and occasionally leads the reader's mind to a certain point and influences their judgment.

Background information can always play an important role in understanding of the news but when we talk about war news reporting or cover the terrorism activities, using the background information can be very sensitive. Because, in a country like Afghanistan which is every day victim of bomb blast, suicide attack and other form of terrorist activities, adding background information at the end of a news about a suicide attack can lead the minds of the people towards a particular terrorist group which is not really the cause of the suicide attack.

## VI. FINDINGS

### A) *Headlines*

#### 1. *The headlines lack accuracy:*

The TOLONews does not write headlines precisely. They write something in the headline which is not part of the news and is nothing but a claim which is not proved.

Example: “Suicide Attack Targets Sikhs in Jalalabad, 19 Killed.” (TOLONews, 2018)

In this headline, TOLONews claims that the Sikhs were targeted by the suicide attacker, but in the body of the news nothing is to prove its claim. The news says that 10 out of 19 killed people were Sikhs that and there is no reason to prove that the Sikhs were the target of the suicide attack. Because 9 other people were also killed in the incident, and also it is mentioned that the Sikhs were on their way to meet President Ashraf Ghani when the suicide attack happened. So, the Sikhs were not targeted in any special event of the Sikhs community, but they have been killed in a common area with other people who were waiting to visit the president. Such a headline can result in inter-ethnic conflict and somehow indirectly threat the minority community like Sikhs in Afghanistan.

## 2. *The headlines are very sensitive and provocative.*

In a post war country like Afghanistan, it is very important to be very careful while disseminating news and information and media should be avoided from sensitive and provocative headlines. TOLONews does not pay enough attention to write an appropriate headline. So sometime, headlines indirectly misguide the audience's mind. For example, look at the following headline:

“Suicide Bomber Targets Election Rally in Nangarhar; 14 Killed.” (TOLONews, 2018)

The Taliban are attacking any place where people gather, and it has nothing to do with the reason for the gathering. Although the Taliban in Afghanistan is opposed to the elections, it is unlikely that their target was rally. But this is only a conjecture and has not been confirmed by the Taliban as the reason behind the suicide attack.

Even if we were to assume that the Taliban's target was the election rally, the issue of rally should not have been bolded in the headline. Highlighting election as the reason for terror will certainly make people avoid participating in the election and election campaigns, and this will automatically serve the interest of Taliban.

The people of Afghanistan are trying to practice democracy. So, the media are supposed to support them and urge them to struggle for citizen's rights.

## 3. *Headlines often Highlight the foreigners and ignore the others;*

A special emphasis on the foreigners is another important point that is visible in TOLONews headlines. Headline contains the most important points of the news. It can be the answer to the “when”, “who”, “where” or “what” depending on the situation and importance.

Usually, when the headline contains the “who”, especially in hard news, it shows the importance, popularity and reputation of a person. Otherwise, all the human beings are equal in dignity and media should differentiate them.

Terrorist activity's Casualties about one or two persons are very common in Afghanistan and the media in Afghanistan including TOLONews often ignore them to cover. But if the casualty includes foreigners, it is immediately covered by TOLONews.

Look at the two-following example:

Example 1. “US Soldier Killed In Apparent Insider Attack In Kabul.” (TOLONews, 2018)

Example 2. “US Soldier Killed In Kabul Had Been A Utah Mayor.” (TOLONews, 2018)

Highlighting the foreigners specially US soldiers leads the people's mind to think that terrorist groups like Taliban is not only fighting against Afghanistan's government but are also fighting against US soldiers. This point is very important because most of the people think that US soldiers are not fighting honestly against Taliban and somehow supporting the Taliban. That is why the Taliban don't kill US soldiers. So, bolding the US soldier who is killed by a terrorist, can remove or weaken the notion that Taliban is supporting by USA.

## B) *Leads*

Compared to the headline, Lead's situation is much better and usually refers to information confirmed by officials. However, Leads do not provide further details and usually deal with the time when the events have occurred. But one can still smell the neutrality of the media.

As can be seen in the headlines of the signs of manipulation of news, there is no such thing in Leads. Only some leads are so short that they are not much different from the headline, and in fact, the same header is just a repetition of the sentence structure. For example, look at the following example.

Headline: “Three Foreigners Killed After Being Kidnapped in Kabul.”

Lead: “Three foreign nationals working in Kabul were killed on Thursday morning by unknown gunmen.” (TOLONews, 2018)

## C) *Background Information*

TOLONews, rarely adds background in its news stories. So, bringing a background to a news story can be an indicator of the importance of the background. Of the 18 news stories analysed in this study, there were three background information and two of them are discussed briefly here.

Example 1: “Baradar was captured in Pakistan by a team of Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers in February 2010.” (TOLONews, 2018)

The above background is added at the end of the news about Mullah Baradar's Release. This background can help readers to get more information about Mullah Baradar and understand the news properly.

This background is a typical background that does not represent a particular issue and is merely intended to better understand the news story. Most people in Afghanistan are familiar with the name of terrorist groups such as the Taliban and ISIS, but still, they need to be updated about the Taliban's leaders.

Example 2: In the current insurgency against NATO and the Afghan government, the Haqqani network has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks in Kabul. (TOLONews, 2018)

The above-mentioned example is the background added in the news about Death of Founder of Haqqani Network.

It is less likely that the Haqqani Network claimed responsibility for the attacks in Afghanistan. On the contrary, it is the Afghan government that has always blamed the Haqqani Network for the terrorist attacks.

While in Afghanistan, the Taliban group is more active than Haqqani Network and has claimed responsibility for the attacks. The government of Afghanistan usually attributes most of the terrorist attacks to the Haqqani Network for unknown reasons.

In this background, it can be deduced that TOLONews, following the Afghan government's policy, has blamed the Haqqani Network for the terrorist attacks without providing any evidence.

## VII. DISCUSSION

Afghanistan is a post-war country and news coverage of terrorist activities by the media is a very difficult work that necessitates more attention and care. If the media fails to pay proper attention to the coverage of terrorism, it can flare-up a war and alter the Afghan people's view against each other, given that those who are active in terrorist groups in Afghanistan are Afghan and represent an ethnic or religious group. A manipulated reflection of terrorist activities could trigger ethnic clashes in Afghanistan.

According to the agenda setting theory, media not only directs what to think but also how to think about the covered issue. The findings show that TOLONews had a pre-defined agenda where they manipulated the news stories. It was thus deduced that TOLONews attempts to manipulate news about terrorism and by manipulating the headlines, leads, and background information it seems to distract the audience from the core of the issue.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

TOLONews does not pay close attention to reporting terrorist activity and in some cases violates the principle of neutrality.

Since TOLONews is one of the most popular media in Afghanistan, it is more professional than other media. Problems in reporting by such a media can indicate problems that may occur in other media as well.

The inaccuracies in the headline writing, the lack of required details in leads, the inadequate information of how terrorist activities happen and the lack of balance are some of the major problems in reporting of terrorist activities by TOLONews.

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