

REFLECTIONS

HYPER-POLICITIZATION OF COVID19 WILL NOT HELP IN OUTBREAK CONTROL

Hyper-politicized television
debates are driving people away
from acquiring critical
information

Experts, not anchors, need to
lead the discussion around
Covid19 responses

Call for media practitioners,
channel owners, advertisers to
exercise responsibility in content
that is aired



“If you don't want many more body bags then you refrain from politicizing it.”

Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

ISLAMABAD: As a media monitoring, analysis and advocacy group, we at Uks Research Centre are deeply perturbed at the continued hyper politicization of COVID 19 on national, mainstream electronic media as well as some sections of the print media.

Uks has been following the rise of this deadly pandemic as well as monitoring its coverage ever since it broke out in China. We have witnessed (through the world media) massive outbreaks, growing numbers of cases, rising number of deaths and then we saw it come to Pakistan.

The following concerns that Uks is sharing is mainly addressed to TV talk shows as they impact the public more — both the literate and the illiterate — with their wide reach.



The Pakistani media's initial response to Covid19 was neither scientific nor accurate as it was trying to grapple with the enormity of the crisis. That, to some extent, is understandable. However, what we have monitored for the entirety of March and now April has seen a great shift in the tone,

attitude and focus of many of the print and electronic content. Though there was some kind of a tug-of-war between a province and the Centre (questioning 'why do numbers matter?' or 'whether to go for a full or partial lockdown'), largely the content focused on the updates, information etc.

But, unfortunately, since last week, Uks has monitored a new spate of political bickering on the media and barring a few, most TV talk shows are busy in pitting a province against the other or Centre against a province. We have counted how 'guests' are invited from various political parties (three to be more specific) and how the whole discussion is tailored to descend into a circus.



This is incredibly bad for outbreak control – it can drive our public away from acquiring information on prevention and updates to fall for who's right and who's wrong. Its fallout is reflected on social media as debates on social media, Twitter in particular, have unfortunately mostly been of racist, sectarian, ethnic and sexist nature.

The politicization of this outbreak will prove a difficult aspect to manage.

Uks understands that it is a tough balance to expect from our TV talk shows where politics is the core focus — irrespective of the issue/s under discussions. So, we have politics inherently intertwined with the COVID 19 response, and it is impossible to tell whether some of the actions taken by governments — federal and provincial — will pay off in the long run or should the public be prepared for a bleaker scenario?

Uks would like to make three appeals:

1. MEDIA PRACTITIONERS: Please avoid taking up issues with a premeditated agenda of political score setting; try not to invite guests who you know will engage in political arguments. And please remember: your five seconds of preaching on 'unity' is not going to have an impact after an hour-long programme full of political bashing, accusations and counter-accusation.
2. ADVERTISERS: Can we expect some national and social responsibility from advertisers and their clients? Please see if you can completely stay away from supporting content that incites the public, hinges on hate speech and creates national and regional divisions in this gravest of grave times? Losing a little money is better than losing human lives.



3. PUBLIC: Reject politicized, mundane debates. Demand reports from professionals in the field of infectious disease —or anyone with any level of understanding about the pandemic is easy to understand and is as up to date as possible. Although the numbers are of interest to you, it's also important for you to see the story behind the numbers, of success stories, of best practices.

Uks requests the entire media, but specifically the 24/7 TV channels, their owners, managing directors, bureau chiefs, and above all the anchors and analysts to please show some responsibility, and refrain from hyper politicizing the COVID 19 crisis, as none of us want to add on to the body bags. The pandemic has no boundaries. We can all be carriers and we are all vulnerable!!!

What is Uks Research Centre? www.uksresearch.com

Since its inception in 1997, Uks has been committed to improving the portrayal of women in the media and newsrooms. Uks has emerged as a pioneer, and a leading force in bringing to light issues relating to women in/and media, thereby adding this critical element to the agenda on women's development in the country. Uks is now also focusing on human rights issues-impacting women, men and transgenders.

For the past 23 years, we do daily monitoring of about 15-16 newspapers and about 4 TV channels

Over:

12,000 newspapers monitored

350,000 news stories in the archives

550 trainings for the media on gender sensitization

12,000 journalists from electronic and print media trained

400 radio programmes produced and aired from radio channels nation wide.

50 publications, including extensive research reports

2500 students from national universities trained on gender issues

30+ international partners

The first ever:

A voluntary Gender Sensitive Code of Ethics for the media 2002- revised in 2013

All women radio production house 2004

Pakistani Women in Media Network 2007

Internet Radio 'Meri awaz Sunno' 2011

Women Media Complaint Cell, active since 2015