

Role of Interpersonal Communication in Agenda Setting Analysis of Obtrusive Versus Non-Obtrusive Issues

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ABSTRACT

The study was meant to tap the role and impact for interpersonal communication in agenda setting effects among viewers of cable channels on obtrusive and non-obtrusive issues by using mix method strategy. For content analysis, two elite cable channels; Express and Geo News were selected to check the coverage patterns of the media. By using random sampling techniques, the data was further delimited to news bulletins of 9.00 p.m. and talk shows of 10.00 p.m. for one year. 500 viewers based in Islamabad were asked to rank the most to least discussed issues of the country from a given list of seven issues. Energy crisis, corruption, law and order, were obtrusive issues while memo gate, democratic process, National Reconciliation Ordinance and Pak-US relations were unobtrusive issues. The results reveal that interpersonal communications do have a premier place for reinforcement and furthering the media agenda. The strong impact has been observed to reinforce the people in discussing the obtrusive issues irrespective of the coverage patterns of the media. The more discussed issue was energy crisis while it was fourth and sixth, in terms of coverage, on Geo and Express News respectively. Law and order was remained as second most discussed issue. Third most discussed issue was corruption among seven issues. Results show that all the three obtrusive issues were remained in top three among seven issues while democratic process in spite of maximum coverage remained at place fifth in terms of most discussed issues. Theory of agenda setting was applied to verify the assumptions of the study.

1. INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Twenty first century began with the dawn of new and latest technology in the field of telecommunication in relatively less developed countries of the South like Pakistan. These latest technologies paved for new horizons in the field of journalism and communication. Access to internet and cable news channels was not less than a dream for the nation. The media boom especially in the field of electronic media during military rule of General Musharraf, has changed the media production and media consumption patterns of the people drastically. Print media reached at its unprecedented position in terms of strength and volume. They became able to attain a significant autonomy in their business like content generation and dissemination. Since the media could not be able to work like an institution and organ of the state, the sole objective of the journalism and media is yet to be witnessed. However, critics of the media are of the view that Pakistani media is enjoying great freedom in their business.

Gallup Pak¹ reports that about 90 TV cable channels are running in the country and most of them are considered as news channels. These news channels have been major source of information for the people especially less educated. Although, these cable channels are still in dominance in urban areas of the country, however, they are cruising to rural

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areas at fast pace. Media in general and private news channels in particular have covered some major national issues extensively during the last few years like, Pak-US relations, law and order, national reconciliation ordinance, corruption, crime, government corruption, judicial crisis, energy crisis etc. Lynger & Kinder quotes Bower, that "By a wide margin, they believe that television - not magazines, not radio, not newspapers - provides the most intelligent, complete, and impartial coverage of public affairs, and goes furthest in clarifying the candidacies and issues at stake in national elections."² Agenda-setting theory has been one of the most applied theories among media effects theories since its first application in Presidential election of 1968 in USA. According to a report, until recent, about 400 research studies have been conducted to measure the agenda setting effects in the world in election and non election settings. Some studies on the role of interpersonal and informal communication in agenda setting have also been witnessed in different social and political setup. The studies more or less proved to be complementary and supportive in reinforcing agenda setting effects.

People have the tendency to discuss the new information, which they receive from media, with their family, friends and colleagues for making some sense on new information. In agenda setting function this interpersonal communication through exchanging information is called an important and enforcing element in exerting media salience to the people. One could call it a step in furthering the agenda of the media or otherwise. In these different steps of message travelling, the process of agenda setting does continue. People according to their own mind map or requirements give importance to that new issue more than some other ongoing issues and it is remained underway during the interpersonal communication and discussion among the members of the society. In other words, as the previous studies show that the discussion on the issue strengthens the agenda setting effects and influence. Through such interpersonal communication and informal channels, the public do have access to information about some issues. The role of interpersonal communication for making some opinion on the social, religious or political issues has been very vital. Especially in traditional and less educated and less media literate societies like Pakistan where people still depend on others for making any political, social and other important decision. Therefore, the room and scope of interpersonal communication is prominent as what discuss in media is ultimate the debate of the people if they consider the matter is relevant and beneficial for them. In spite of having sharp growth in cable industry in recent years, there is still a notable dependency of the public on other social and conventional methods to make some opinion on the local, national and international issues. The present study was planned to assess the role and influence of the interpersonal communication in agenda setting with special reference to obtrusive and non obtrusive issues.

Siraj stated that "we are living in a three-minute culture because reality is littered with video footage, computer games, advertising, film, television images and photographs."³ Rozell said, "Many refer to John F. Kennedy as the nation's first "television president."⁴ The immediacy of television was distinguishing itself from newspapers and magazines over the time just like as the radio has more immediacy than television.

Yang & Stone cited McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes that the researchers of agenda setting began to investigate the relationship of the agenda setting effects with interpersonal communication soon after the inception of the theory. Interpersonal communication played a significant role in agenda setting with the decline of newspapers as a source of information late in a campaign. A study conducted by Shaw's that a political campaign did support the assumption that interpersonal factors were

sound predictors of agenda setting. The information is delivered not only through media presentations and personal experiences but arranged networks of the social interaction. Chaffee further argues that “when we seek information, it is often for corroboration or comparison with prior constructions of reality, and we seek it through those channels that are most accessible to us and are likely to have something additional to say on the subject.”⁵

Although “the more people talk with one another about information from the mass media, the greater is the total impact of the media on social action.”⁶ According to McCombs & Shah “the nature of the relationship between media agenda-setting and the respondents’ involvement in interpersonal communication is less clear.”⁷⁻⁸ Some studies report that interpersonal communication reduces agenda-setting effects, while “others find that interpersonal communication enhances media effect.”⁹ On the other hand, Lasorsa and Wanta were of the view that interpersonal communication does not have any effect on the agenda setting process. They further of the view that it might be due to the difference between personal level and social level agenda. They further of the view that “there is evidence that over time increased interpersonal discussion may lead to more similarity between personal-level and social-level agendas.”¹⁰ Later on Weaver, Graber, McCombs and Eyal¹¹ study on this pattern witnessed in their year-long study on presidential election and found that intrapersonal and perceived society agendas began more aligned with interpersonal agenda on politics. Weaver¹² conceptualized the idea of Lippmann’s that interpersonal discussion not only reinforces the bridging function of interpersonal communication, but it is also helpful in connecting the personal world with a larger community world which is outside the individual’s immediate experience -the world outside- the world “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.” Interpersonal communication helps to comprehend the mass media messages. Interpersonal communication helps to comprehend the mass media messages. In the underdeveloped traditional societies like Pakistan where literacy rate is very low and access to information and media is still a matter of luxury or urban phenomenon, the personal relationship among members of the society is very strong for getting, updating and building some opinion on new information. This dependency of less educated people is still a part and parcel of more educated and politically and socially aware masses.

Wanta & Wu¹³ conducted a survey to tap the political opinion comparing media sources with personal sources. They were of the view that interpersonal communication did enhance agenda setting effects when the people discussed the issue that covered in the media. When the discussed issue was remained less in coverage by the media, the interpersonal communication contended with the media in agenda setting. Yang & Stone of the view that, “interpersonal communication may increase salience by playing an essential role when people want to make sense of new topics reported by the media.”¹⁴ Roberts et al. cited Wanta and Wu that “interpersonal communication can reinforce the media agenda-setting effects on the public agenda when the conversation deals with the same issue that the media have emphasized.”¹⁵ The issues are normally of two types obtrusive and non-obtrusive. Agenda setting effects may vary in degree and nature on obtrusive and non-obtrusive issues. Zucker¹⁶ of the view that, obtrusiveness refers to the degree of exposure to the public with the policy issue. More the obtrusive the issue, less a person will be media reliant for orientation. More the unobtrusive the issue, more person will be media reliance for orientation. Transfer of salience is significant among unobtrusive issues. Stefaan¹⁷ stated as, the issues which people face and experience directly they are called obtrusive issues like energy crisis, law and order, food crisis,

corruption at lower level, environment, price hike etc. On the other hand, people do not experience unobtrusive issues and do not suffer from these issues directly like democratic process, armed race, foreign policy, Presidential election etc. On the basis of review of previous literature, following two hypotheses were posed:-

H1. Interpersonal communication amplifies the agenda setting effects.

H2. Interpersonal communication increase agenda setting effects in obtrusive more than the unobtrusive issues.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Mix methods (content and survey) were designed to evaluate the relationship between media and public agendas. For the purpose, two mainstream Urdu news channels Geo and Express News have been selected. News bulletins and talk shows of these channels at 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. respectively were chosen for sampling purposes of content. One year study period started from October 2011 to September 2012. The rationale for selection of these cable channels was the popularity and wide acceptance news channels¹⁸. Both these elite channels have the capability to build and rebuild the public opinion through their presentations. Two big publication groups; Jang group and Express group are running these channels. Prime time talk shows 'Kal Tak' and 'Aaj Khan Kay Saath' of Express News and Geo News were selected respectively. For the first sample, 156 talk shows (Monday, Wednesday and Friday of every week) were selected for Geo News while on the same pattern, 156 talk shows were selected on alternate days (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday of every week) of Express News. For the second sample of the content analysis, news bulletins of prime time at 9 p.m. were selected. 156 each news bulletins were available to tap the media salience as a second sample of the content analysis. Altogether, 312 talk shows while the same numbers of bulletins were on hand for analysis. 500 viewers (250 for each channel) who were living and having cable connections surveyed through a closed ended questionnaire. 25 questionnaires each were distributed among 20 different sectors of the city except commercial areas. To avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding on the questionnaire's responses, data was collected in face to face meeting. The stories telecast during the study period of one year in both news bulletins and talk shows were counted and correlated with the responses of the viewers on the issues. However, for a common understanding on media agenda, the duration of the issues given by the channels was also calculated in minutes. Agenda setting was the main theory applied in this study; however, priming theory was also applied to look into the media priorities of some issues.

McCombs¹⁹ of the view that:

The nine major news sources used by these voters were also content analyzed. This included five local and national newspapers, two television networks and two news magazines. The rank order of issues on the media agenda was determined by the number of news stories devoted to each issue in recent weeks. Although this was not the very first time that survey research had been combined with content analysis to assess the effects of specific media content, their tandem use to measure the effects of mass communication was rare at that time. (Email reply)

3. FINDINGS

3.1 COVERAGE OF ISSUES BY EXPRESS NEWS

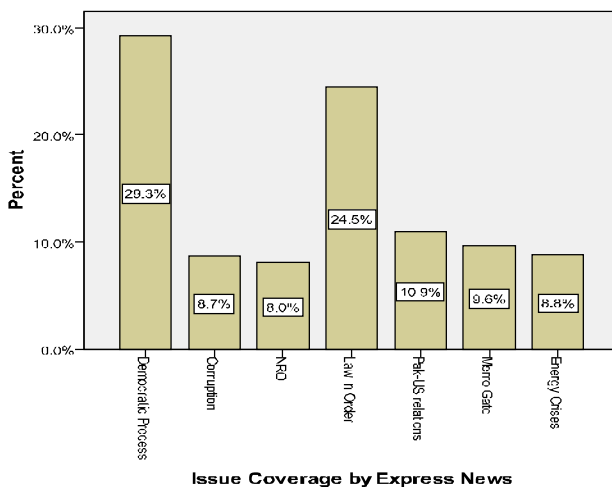


Figure 1

Express News broadcast 1143 stories on seven issues of the study during the period of one year. The channel gave largest coverage (29 percent) to the issue of democratic process in bulletins and talk shows. The issue of law and order was remained the second most covered (24 percent) news issue stories as apparent in the figure above. The third position was spared for the issue of Pak-US relations with 11 percent coverage. The issue of memo gate remained at position four with 10 percent news stories. The issue of energy crisis grabbed 9 percent coverage of the total coverage and was placed at position five among seven issues. The figure-1 above shows that the issue of corruption had nine percent of the total coverage and placed at six among seven issues. The issue of NRO with eight percent coverage was remained as the least covered issue.

3.2 COVERAGE OF ISSUES BY GEO NEWS

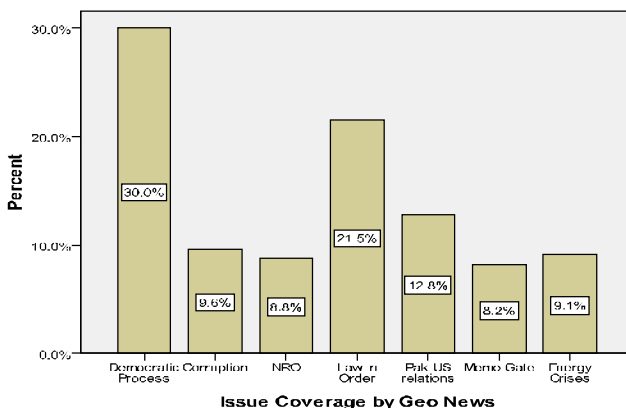


Figure 2

Geo News channel covered 1297 news stories on seven issues in talk shows and news bulletins at 10.00 pm and 9.00 pm respectively. As apparent in the figure 2, the largest coverage has been given to the issue of democratic process by sparing 30 percent stories. Quite similar to the Express News, the second most covered news issue was law and order. The issue grabbed 21 percent coverage during the study period. Third most covered issue was Pak-US relations which received 13 percent news stories of the total coverage. 10 percent coverage is given to the issue of corruption which placed at position four among seven. Geo News covered the issue of Energy Crisis by devoting 9 percent news stories and placed at number five. Figure 2 above depicted that the issue of NRO remained on position sixth having 9 percent score of news items. The channel placed the issue of memo gate as the least important issue by giving eight percent coverage.

3.3 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

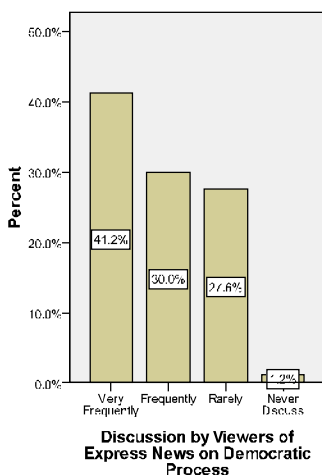


Figure 3

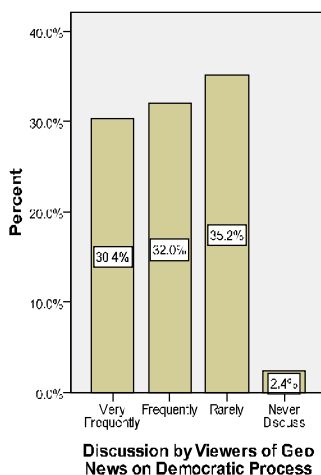


Figure 4

As evident from the above figures that viewers discussed the issue of democratic process frequently. The channel also gave a huge coverage to the issue by devoting about 30 percent coverage of the total coverage of seven issues. About 67 percent of the viewers of both the channels did discuss the issue frequently while about 31 percent discussed the issue rarely. There have been great similarities in the patterns of discussion of the issue among the viewers of both the channels.

3.4 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION ORDINANCE

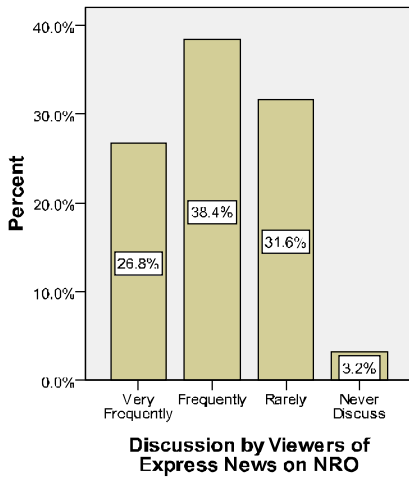


Figure 5

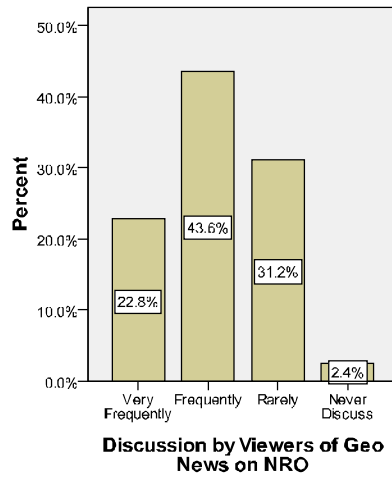


Figure 6

The outcome of the survey again shows great similarities in the patterns of interpersonal communication on the issue of National Reconciliation Ordinance. 66 percent viewers of Geo News while 67 percent viewers of Express News were discussed the issue of NRO frequently. 31 percent viewers discussed the issue rarely. The audiences who never discussed the issue were remained less than four percent.

3.5 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF LAW AND ORDER

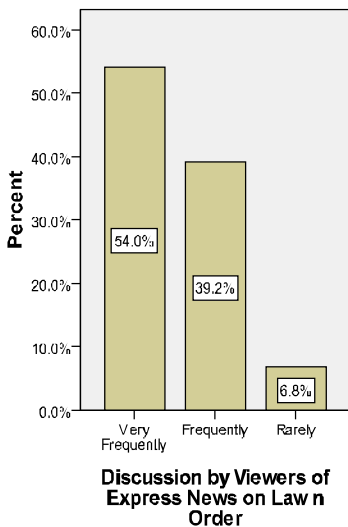


Figure 7

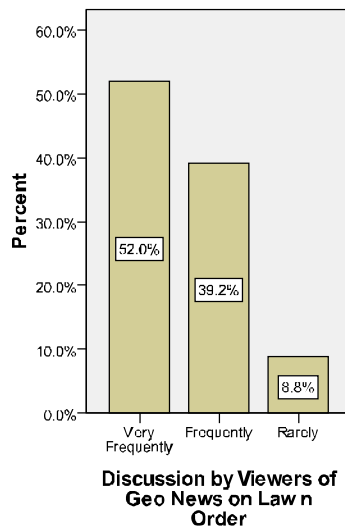


Figure 8

Majority (92 Percent) viewers of both the news channels did discuss the issue of law and order frequently as depicted in the above figures. Since the issue is an obtrusive one, the viewers did discuss it frequently.

3.6 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF ENERGY CRISIS

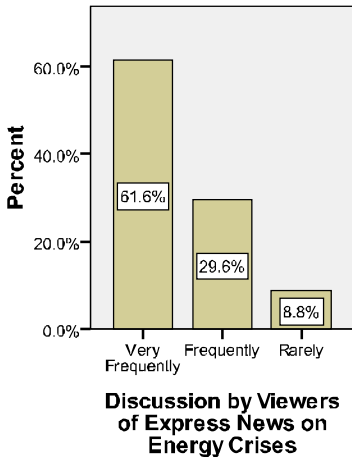


Figure 9

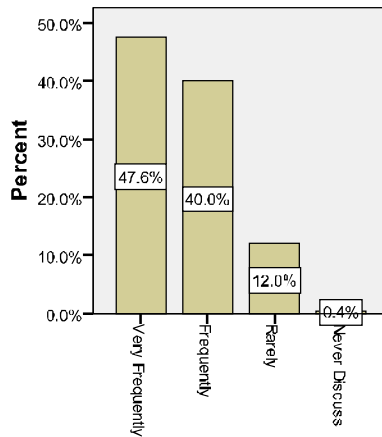


Figure 10

Energy crisis was another frequently discussed issue among the understudied seven issues. Being an obtrusive nature, viewers discussed it regularly and frequently as evident from the above figures. Both the channels placed this issue at position five, while people rated it as more important. About 89 percent viewers of both the channels were discussed the issue depicted above.

3.7 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF PAK-US RELATIONS

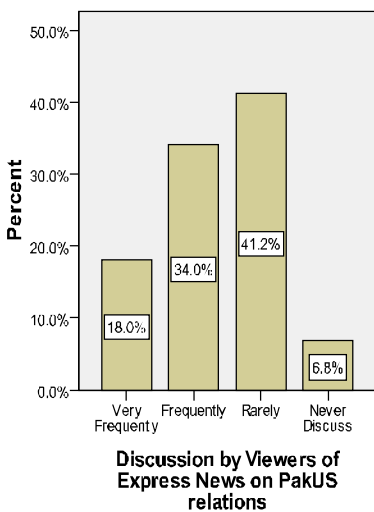


Figure 11

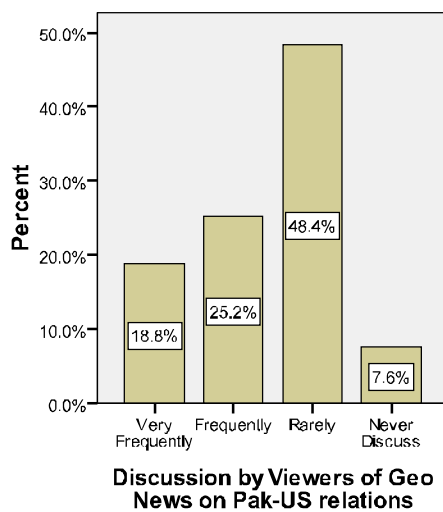


Figure 12

As clear from the figures above, almost half 48 percent of the viewers did discuss the issue of Pak-US relations frequently while 45 percent viewers did discuss the issue rarely. Pak-US relations was remained the third most covered issue on both the channels among the seven issues.

3.8 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF CORRUPTION

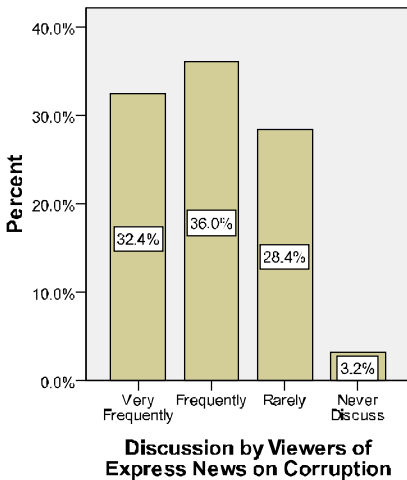


Figure 13

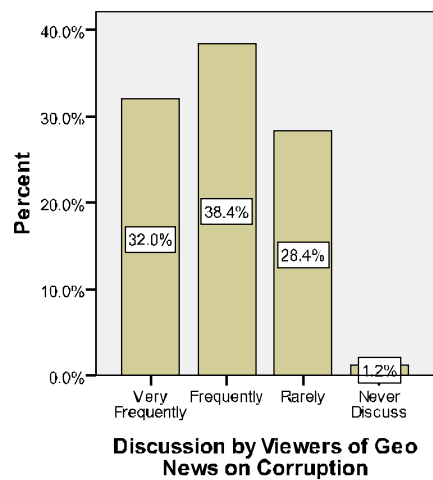


Figure 14

The issue of corruption has been discussed frequently by the viewers of both the channels as evident from the above figures. 69 percent viewers did discuss the issue frequently. The issue was also remained among top three in terms of time duration given by the channels. About 2 percent viewers did not discuss the issue.

3.9 VIEWERS' DISCUSSION ON THE ISSUE OF MEMO GATE

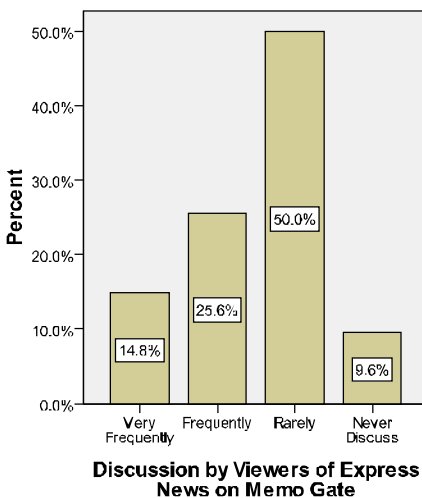


Figure 13

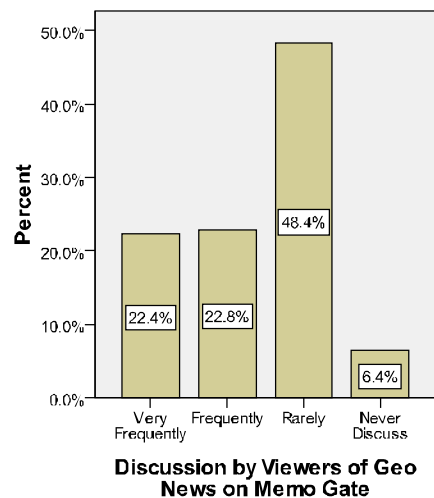


Figure 14

49 percent viewers discussed the issue of memo gate rarely while about 8 percent did not discuss it; however, 43 percent viewers discussed the issue frequently. Despite wide coverage of the issue, the audiences did not discuss it very frequently.

4. DISCUSSION ON RESULTS

The results of this research project support the hypotheses and research questions posed by the researcher. Salience of media did increase with the frequency of interpersonal communication on the issues which report by the media. H1 of the study proved which says that interpersonal communication amplifies the agenda setting effects, however, another very significant outcome of the study was frequent discussions on some obtrusive issues; like energy crisis, law and order and corruption. Despite less coverage in the media, the viewers were discussed the issue of energy crisis frequently. It might be due to the obtrusive nature of the issue. The audiences discussed the issue of energy crisis significantly as 89 percent viewers discussed the issue (Figures 9 & 10). Despite placing the issue as fourth and sixth most covered issue in Geo and Express News respectively, the viewers discussed very frequently as everybody was suffering and facing great hardship due to severe shortfall of energy. The second most discussed issue among seven issues of the study was law and order which frequently discussed by 92 percent viewers (Figures 7 & 8). Since the issue was of personal and obtrusive nature, the people did experience it directly. According to media salience this issue covered as the second most important issue and the viewers placed this in first position in interpersonal communication, therefore, our second hypothesis 'Interpersonal communication increase agenda setting effects in obtrusive issues more than the unobtrusive issues' has been proved true. The issue of corruption was another obtrusive issue in this research project. Everybody has been facing the issue of corruption in every segment and at every level of the society; therefore, this issue becomes obtrusive in nature. 69 percent audiences discussed the issue frequently as shown in Figures, 13 & 14. Democratic process, memo gate, Pak-US relations and National Reconciliation ordinance (NRO) were unobtrusive issues and these issues did not discuss regularly and frequently, however, these issues were remained prominent and significant. The reason of the significance of these unobtrusive issues might be the availability of comparatively vibrant and transparent media and especially in shape of cable news channels. The other reason of the public's interest in the politics might be the restoration of democracy and back to back general elections in the country. The issue of Pak-US relation was extensively covered by the media in recent years; however, it has been discussed by 48 percent viewers by using their informal and interpersonal channels. In spite being third most covered issue by these channels, the people did not discuss it frequently as it was unobtrusive issue (Figures 11 & 12). On the same pattern, the issue of memo gate was remained less discussed issue among public. 43 percent viewers did discuss the issue frequently while more than 49 percent rarely discussed it.

5. CONCLUSION

The main objective of the study was to scale the role and impact of interpersonal communication in agenda setting effects. The results helped to conclude that interpersonal communication enhances the effects and impact of the agenda setting on media users. The study overall strengthens the theoretical assumption of the agenda setting theory that interpersonal channel is augmented the effects. Interpersonal communication amplifies the effects when issue covered in media and the issue discussed among public is the same. The study further concluded that there is a difference in patterns of discussions among viewers on obtrusive and non-obtrusive issues, however, these discussion are subject to the importance and immediacy of the issue being presented in media for desiring some certain direction.

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