COVERAGE OF FOOD AND ENERGY CRISES IN NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS OF PAKISTAN

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Introduction:

Pakistan is passing through a worst kind of food and energy crises. An agricultural country with vast land resources, which was once a big importer of the food crops a few years ago, now is facing a huge shortage of the basic food crops especially wheat flour. The country is also facing the worst kind of energy crisis in its history which has paralyzed public life as well as the industrial sector. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the nature and treatment of the news coverage about these two important issues in the national newspapers of Pakistan.

Food Crisis:

An agricultural country like Pakistan is suffering shortage of food items especially wheat flour and sugar. The price of wheat and its flour has been increased many times in recent years. Even then wheat flour is not easily available to people. There are certain reasons for this crisis. First, the population of the country has increased manifold and the need for food has also increased. Secondly, the water level in the rivers has decreased which has resulted in less production of wheat. Thirdly, a major portion of our wheat is exported or smuggled to Afghanistan as it is dependent on Pakistan for many things including food because they have no agriculture, no industry, no seaport, no jobs and no business,

Pakistan is passing through the worst kind of sugar crisis in its history. With in a period of six months, its price has been raised from Rs. 25 per kilogram to Rs. 70 per kilogram. The Supreme court of the country had to interfere to facilitate the public. The price of the sugar was fixed by the apex court at Rs. 40 per kilogram but it is not available in the market. According to a report of the daily Nation, the Cabinet is reported to have directed the Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP) to import sugar, based on predictions of shortage of sugar in the market.[1] The sugar industry plays an important role in the economy of the country. It is the second largest industry after textiles. The sugar sector constitutes 4.2 percent of manufacturing. [2] Even then the country is facing shortage of this basic food commodity.

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[1] Daily The Nation Islamabad. August 22, 2009.

[2] Allauddin Masood, "Impact of Sugar crisis, how the game was played" Business and Finance Review magazine, August 2009.

Shortage of food is not only a local issue rather it is a global concern. Aid agencies all around the world worry how they will feed the hungry. Governments are facing difficulties to fund subsidies to their public. Sky-rocketing prices of food material are hitting consumers and raising fears of public turmoil in many parts of the world. The experts state numerous reasons behind the crisis.

One of the main reasons is the rising price of fuel and fertilizer as well as the production of crops affected by plant diseases, pests and climate change. Poor weather in some countries is increasing the pressure. Frequent flooding and changing patterns of rainfall are already beginning to have a significant impact on agricultural production worldwide. The finger of blame is also being pointed at a number of sources, including increased demand from the growing population and the change of options form cultivating land to the use of bio-fuel productions.

In Pakistan, a sharp increase occurred in the prices of the food items recently. In less than a year, the price of wheat has been doubled; corn, maize and soya bean are all well above average prices during the 1990s. Rice is at a 10-year high. Food prices in the world markets have at least doubled since 2004. There are concerns that prices could rise further. The rising wheat price means the cost of a loaf of bread has more than doubled in places where the poor spend as a greater percentage of their income on food.

Pakistan is an agricultural country and one of the biggest exporters of wheat, rice and sugar in the world. Over 70 percent of its population works in the agriculture sector. In spite of these facts, Pakistan has been facing acute shortage of food items for the last one year. Our country is gifted with natural resources; still there is a food crisis. Who stands responsible for this crisis? Whether these are wrong strategies and planning of our rulers or the selfishness of our flour mill owners and traders? Flour is in such a short supply that the retailers are charging double price. Officials responsible to check the price-hike are doing nothing. The entire blame is on the government for its failure to ensure adequate supply of the food items to the people. The millers blame that they do not have the adequate quotas while the government claims that a sufficient quantity of wheat has been released to the flour mills.

At the time of harvesting of the wheat crop in 2007, it was estimated that there would be record production and even the government allowed export of one million tons of wheat[3]. The problems of food shortage are due to ill planning, poor system of estimation of the size of the crops, smuggling and market manipulation. A huge quantity of the wheat flour is smuggled to Afghanistan and other neighboring countries because the price of this commodity in Pakistan is much lower.

The middle class is the worst affected by the price-hike and food crisis. The blame for the people's suffering falls on the shoulders of the bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians. One can see a lot of anger, resentment and discontentment over the rising prices. People

[3] Daily Dawn, Islamabad. December 20th 2007.

seem to think that the government has been totally ineffective in checking the prices. Every year, there is one excuse or another. It is high time for the government to make practical planning, effective strategies and implement schemes to overcome this issue. Hoarders must be dealt with an iron hand and taken to task so that they may not dare to create more problems for the nation.

The most alarming situation has been pointed out by the recent report of the World Health Organization (WHO) which states that the rapid rise in the price of basic foodstuffs is beginning to have a profound humanitarian impact in the poorest countries. According to the report, Pakistan is one of the 32 nations which likely to have severe food crises and subsequent social unrest if domestic policies are not altered. There are early signs it will exacerbate malnutrition rates. In the coming years many poorer populations will be forced to switch to cheaper, less nutritional food. Moreover, the population of countries dependent on food from other provinces/districts, particularly those in urban areas, are likely to eat fewer meals. The resultant increase in malnutrition and associated morbidity will have a profound impact on already increasing poverty levels, with subsequent economic costs due to reduced work productivity and increased health care costs. Aggravating factors include a lack of awareness, low literacy and poor hygiene[4].

Energy Crisis:

According to Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, an energy crisis is any great bottleneck (or price rise) in the supply of energy resources to an economy. It usually refers to the shortage of oil and additionally to electricity or other natural resources. An energy crisis may be referred to as an oil crisis, petroleum crisis, energy shortage, electricity shortage or electricity crisis[5].

Pakistan is passing through the situation of the worst ever energy crisis. According to an official report, the country is currently facing a shortage of 3000 Mega Watt electricity. The report says that the actual consumption of electricity is 14500 MW while the current production is only 11500 MW[6].

Because of this shortfall, the daily life of the people in Pakistan is badly disturbed. Residential and commercial units, industries, government and private offices, markets are facing a huge problem of power cut-off. Usually, in big cities the power supply is suspended for six intervals of one hour each in a day. However, there is unlimited power shut down in rural areas of the country.

The reason for this problem lies in the weaknesses of the governments as it did not take any action well in time to overcome the problem. The population of the country has increased manifold but no arrangement has been done for their energy needs. The two major dams, Tarbela and Mangla, have been filled with silt and their storage capacity has

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[4] World Health Organization Report 2008.

[5] www.wikipedia.com

[6] Daily Dawn Islamabad. May 13th 2008.

decreased sharply. This situation has resulted in low production of electricity. No big dam has been constructed to meet the needs of the nation. Billions of dollars have been invested on the feasibility report of Kalabagh dam, but now this project has been closed due to political reasons. The government has announced construction of small dams but worries persist there that this arrangement will not be sufficient to meet the needs of the nation. Despite strong economic growth during the past decade and consequent rising demand for energy, no worthwhile steps have been taken to install new capacity for generation of the required energy sources. Now, the demand exceeds supply and hence "load-shedding" is a common phenomenon through frequent power shutdowns. This shortage is badly affecting industry, commerce and daily life of people.

A report was published almost five years ago (in 2004) in the national press of Pakistan that the country may plunge into energy crisis by the year 2007 due to rising electricity demand which enters into double digit figure following increasing sale of electrical and electronic appliances on lease finance. It was also stated in the report that the country needs a big jump in electricity generation in medium-term scenario to revert the possibilities of load shedding in future due to shrinking gap between demand and supply of electricity at peak hours[7]. (The Nation, July 2nd, 2004).

Energy has become an important prerequisite for the economic development of a country. On one hand it is used for the industrial and agricultural purposes and on the other hand it is required for domestic use of the citizens. Natural gas is the fastest growing primary energy source. It was realized in 2001 that the consumption of natural gas would increase by nearly 70 percent between 2002 and 2025, with the most vigorous growth in demand expected among the emerging economies. Consumption of natural gas worldwide increases in the forecast by an average of 2.3 percent annually from 2002 to 2025, compared with projected annual growth rates of 1.9 percent for oil consumption and 2.0 percent for coal consumption. The electric power sector accounts for almost one-half of the total incremental growth in worldwide natural gas demand over the period mentioned.

South Asia is important to world energy markets because it contains 1.3 billion people and is experiencing rapid energy demand growth. After India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the next largest South Asian countries in these categories. Economic and population growth in South Asia have resulted in rapid increases in energy consumption in recent years. The major energy issues facing South Asian nations today are keeping up with rapidly rising energy demand.

About This Study:

This research project was aimed to investigate how the print media of the country reported the food and energy crises. For this purpose, content analysis technique was adopted for the study. Content of the two popular national newspapers, daily Jang Rawalpindi and daily Dawn Islamabad was analyzed for this study for one year. (From May 1st 2007 to April 30th 2008). The reason for the selection of these newspapers is that

[7] Daily The Nation Islamabad. July 2nd, 2004.

the former is the largest widely circulated Urdu newspaper in Pakistan while the later is the largest widely circulated English daily in the country. Both newspapers have a strong professional reputation covering almost all important issues of the country as well as of the world. They have engaged a sufficient number of highly qualified senior and professional journalists in their organizational structures. The main reason for the time period is that the issues of the study remained dominant in the Pakistani print media almost constantly throughout the period of the research study. The content analysis of the front and back pages of the newspapers was done on the alternate days. The content analysis of daily Dawn was conducted on newspapers published on even dates (2, 4 6, etc.) and the content of the daily Jang was analyzed on the odd dates (1, 3, 5, etc.). Hence the content of a total number of 182 copies of daily Dawn and 183 newspapers of daily Jang was analyzed thoroughly and the news on the issues of the study were counted and their length was measured in centimeters per column.

Variables of The Content Analysis Frequency and Length:

News stories published about the issue of the study on the front and back pages of the sample newspapers were counted and their length was measured in centimeters per column.

Slant

The slant of the news stories published about the issues was also analyzed in terms of favorable for the government, unfavorable for the government and neutral. The slant was measured by analyzing the coding unit of analysis that was paragraph.

Frame

It means how a news story was framed. The frames of the news stories were measured in terms of pro-government, anti-government and neutral. These were measured on the basis of the contextual unit because the whole news story was a contextual unit.

Placement

The placement is also a very important factor in media agenda setting. It means where the news story was placed in the newspaper. In this study, the placement was divided into four categories. These are as under:

1- Front Page upper half
2- Front Page lower half
3- Back Page upper half
4- Back Page lower half

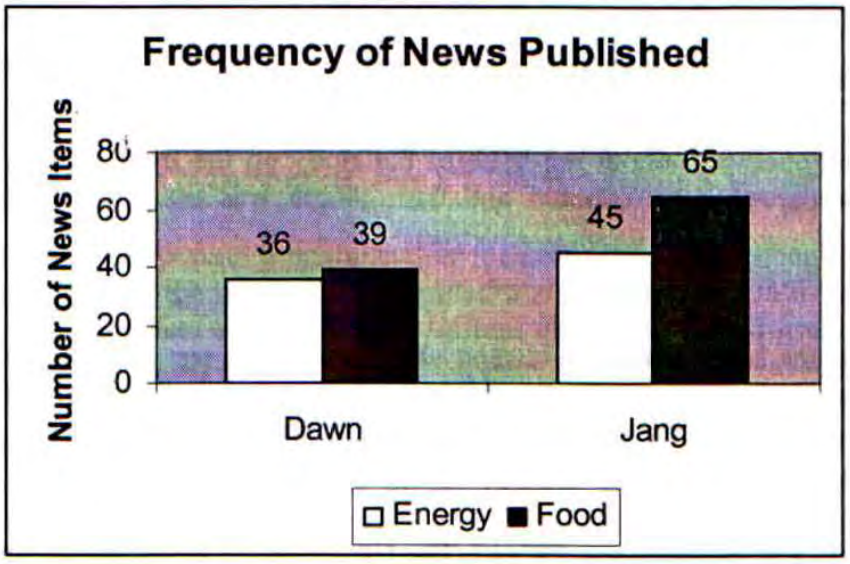
The paragraphs of the news stories were the coding unit of the content analysis. These were counted in terms of favorable, unfavorable and neutral. The whole news story was the contextual unit of analysis in this study and frames were measured on the basis of this unit. Framing was measured through contextual units of analyses.

Results Of The Study:

Frequency of News Items

The daily Dawn published 36 news items on its front and back pages on the alternate days in the year of the study period about the issue of energy crisis while the daily Jang published 45 news stories about the issue of energy crisis in this time period. On the other hand, the daily Dawn published 39 news items about the issue of food crises and the Jang published 65 news items about the same issue on its front and back pages on alternate days round the year. The following picture demonstrates the number of news items published about the issues of food and energy crises.

Figure 1

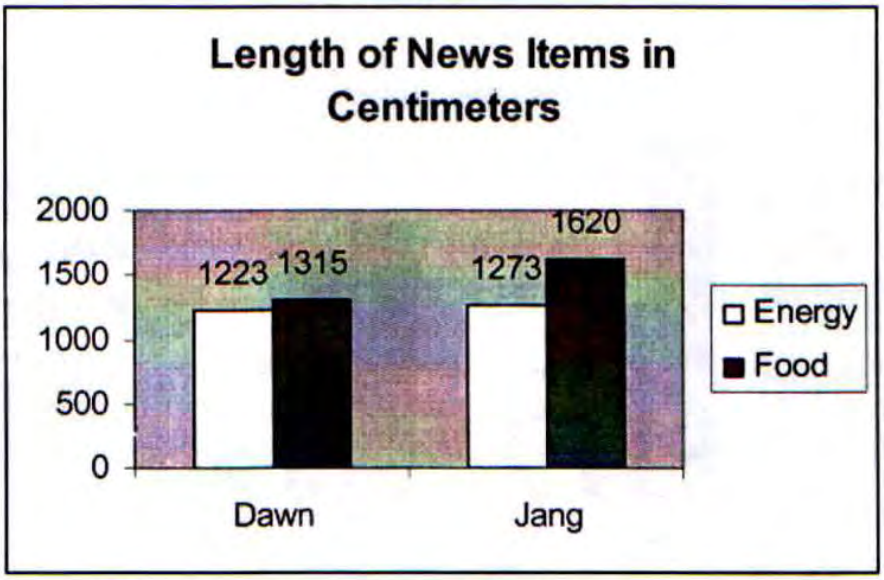


The most important thing is that the national newspapers of the country published very few news items about the two issues of public concern that were affecting public life as well as industrial production. The number ranging from 36 to a maximum of 65 news items is too less as compared to the news items about other political and international matters. For example, the number of news items about the issue of terrorism remained 479 and 316 in daily Dawn and Jang respectively while the same newspapers published 129 and 407 news items about the issue of judicial crisis in the country on their front and back pages on alternate days.

Length of News Items:

The space given to the news items about the issues of the food and energy crises was measured in centimeters per column. The Dawn donated a total space of 1223 centimeter column to the issue of energy crisis and 1315 centimeter column space to the issue of food crisis during the study period of one year on their front and back pages.

Figure 2



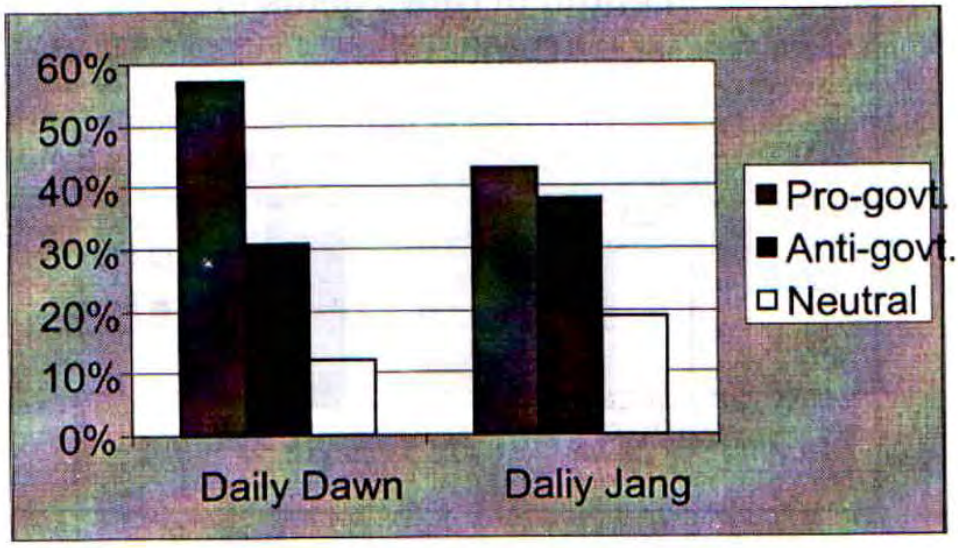
On the other hand, the daily Jang donated 1273 centimeters column to the issue of energy crisis while it gave a space of 1620 centimeters column to the coverage of the food crises. It is apparent that daily Jang donated more space to both issues of public concern than daily Dawn.

Slant for the issue of Energy Crisis:

Figure 3 shows the ratio of slant given by the newspapers for the issue of energy crisis. The dominant slant was in favor of the government in both newspapers. Dawn gave 57 percent coverage while Jang donated 43 percent coverage of this issue in favor of the government. Unfavorable for the government was 31 percent in Dawn and 38 percent in Jang.

Most of the news stories in the favor of the government were about the government efforts and statements to overcome the shortage of energy resources and to overcome power cut-off. Some news items were published about the construction of new dams and import of electricity from some nearby countries.

Figure 3: Slant for the issue of energy crisis

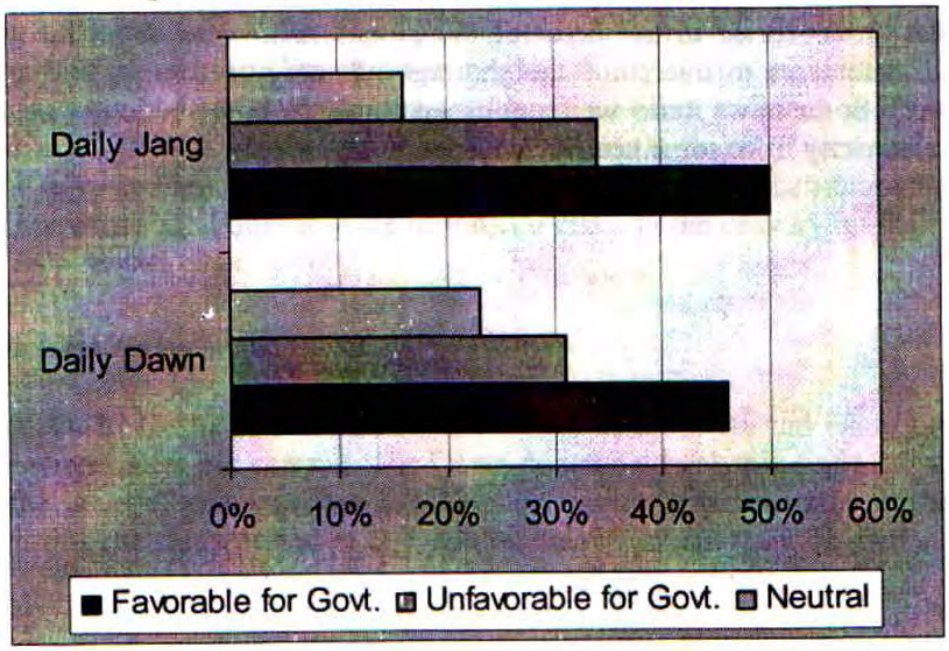


The news of the issue that were counted and measured as unfavorable for the government were about the long power cut-offs, peoples' demonstrations against the authorities, closure of some industrial units because of the power shortage etc.

Slant for the Issue of Food Crisis:

The slant for the issue of food crisis is evident from figure 4. It can be seen that although the people of Pakistan are suffering from shortage of food, the national newspapers of Pakistan follow the official line of the government not taking any care of the real problems faced by the people.

Figure 4: Slant for the issue of food crisis



Both newspapers published more news in favor of the government than the news unfavorable for the government on the issue of the food crisis. Dawn and Jang published 46 percent and 50 percent news about the issue of the food crisis in favor of the government respectively. However, they published 31 percent and 34 percent news items that were giving an unfavorable image of the government respectively. The percentage of the neutral news items on the issue was 23 in Dawn and 16 in Jang.

The news items regarding the government's efforts to overcome the food shortage, supply of wheat quota to flour mills, incentives to farmers to produce more wheat crop, supply of wheat flour and other food items at subsidized rates at the government run utility stores etc. were included in the category of the news favorable for the government. On the other hand, the unfavorable news about this category included the stories about shortage of wheat flour, news items about wheat smuggling to Afghanistan, high prices and non availability of basic food necessities, etc. which were counted as unfavorable for the government.

Framing Results:

Regarding the framing of the issue of the energy crisis, both newspapers seem to support the government giving a pro-government frame about the coverage of the energy crisis. The Dawn donated the pro-government frame to 23 news stories on the issue while it gave anti-government frame to 13 news items in this regard. The Jang published 46 news items on the issue of energy crisis in which 27 news items were having a frame of pro-government and 19 of them were carrying anti-government frame. It seems that the newspapers favored the government on this issue. Most of the news items were statements of the ministers and government authorities to overcome the shortage of the electricity.

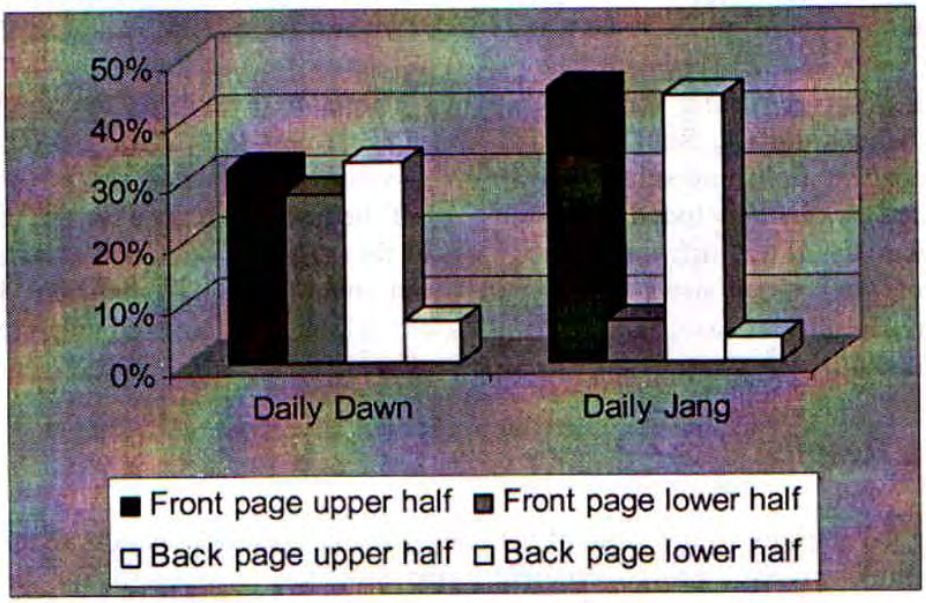
The Dawn published 21 news items on the issue of the food crisis in which the government was favored while 19 news stories were having a frame of anti-government coverage. On the other hand, the daily Jang published 38 news stories on the issue of the food crisis giving a pro-government frame while 27 news items presented an anti-government frame regarding the coverage of the issue.

Placement of the news stories on the issue of Energy Crisis:

The figure 5 unveils the placement of the coverage given to the issue of the energy crisis by the two national newspapers of Pakistan. The Dawn published 32 percent news items on the issue on the upper half portion of its front page, 28 percent news stories on the lower half of its front page, 33 percent news items on the upper half back page and the remaining seven percent news stories on the lower half portion of the back page. Similarly, the daily Jang published maximum news items (45 percent) about the issue of the energy crisis on the upper half portion of the front page and only seven percent on the lower half front page. However, the newspaper published 44 percent news stories on the issue on the upper half portion of its back page and only four percent news items on the

lower half of its back page. The ratio of the placement of the news items of the issue between the front and back pages remained 60: 40 in the Dawn and 52: 48 in the Jang.

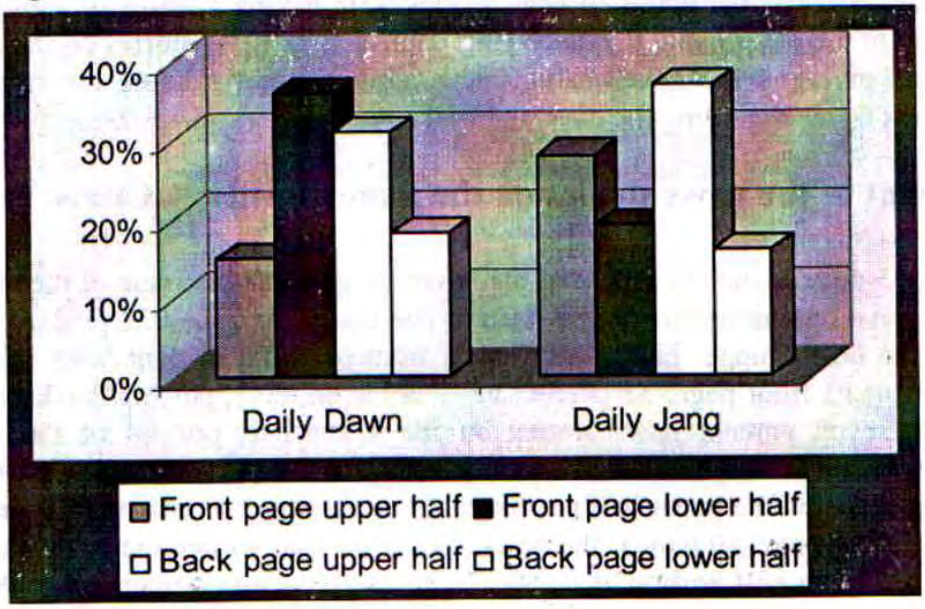
Figure 5: Placement of the news stories on the issue of Energy Crisis



Placement of the news stories on the issue of Food Crisis:

Although both the newspapers of the content analysis of this study gave a poor coverage to the vital issue of the energy crisis, however, the coverage is spread all over the four categories of the placement. The daily Dawn published 15 percent news items on the issue of the food crisis on the upper half of its front page while the Jang published 28 percent such news on the same position.

Figure 6: Placement of the news stories on the issue of Food Crisis



The earlier newspaper published 36 percent news about the issue of the food crisis on the lower half portion of its front page while the later one published 19 percent news on the same position. The Dawn printed 31 percent news stories on the issue in the upper half of the back page while the Dawn published 37 percent news items on this position. The issue of the food crisis got 18 percent coverage on the lower half portion of the back page in the daily Dawn while it got 16 percent of its total coverage on the same position in the daily Jang. The ratio of the placement of the news items of the issue between the front and back pages remained 51: 49 in the Dawn and 47: 53 in the Jang. The placement of the news stories about the issue of the food crisis is reflected in the figure 6.

Conclusion:

On the basis of the results of the study it can be concluded that the national print media of the country gave a relatively poor coverage to the issues of public concern. The newspapers of the study published only a less number of news items the issues of food and energy crises. Even then most of the news items published in the news papers presented a governmental point of view rather giving a public point of view. Only very few news stories presented the public view point about the two issues. This is the need of the day that the national media should play a pivotal role in highlighting the issues of public concern like the issues of this study. Media can also play a vital role by giving feasible suggestions and proposals to the government authorities to overcome these issues. The general public of the country should be encouraged to give their ideas to tackle the situation. Journalists can also remind the rulers about their big claims to tackle the situation. By playing a real watch dog role, the media organizations especially, the newspaper organizations can play their role to overcome the most challenging issues like food and energy.