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**Analyzing the Portrayal of PTI's Legitimacy and Identity by the Pakistani Print Media
During the 2024 General Elections**

Name: Ayesha Jilani

Roll no.: 251694104

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. M. Vaqas Ali

Department of Sociology

Forman Christian College (A Chartered University)

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Abstract

This study investigates the extent to which Pakistani print media aligns with the hegemonic perspective as opposed to adopting a watchdog role in portraying the legitimacy and identity of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) during the 2024 General Elections. The front page news stories directly or indirectly addressing PTI's legitimacy or identity were selected (N=191) from 2 English newspapers with the highest circulation in the country, *Dawn* and *The News*. The hegemonic perspective was operationalized as stories portraying PTI as a terrorist organization or as anti-state and anti-democracy, undermining its adherence to societal values like justice and accountability, and dismissing its assertions of victimhood. The watchdog perspective was operationalized as stories presenting a neutral viewpoint or framing PTI as a legitimate political party aligned with legal and ethical standards. Using content analysis, 5 themes (language, sources, facts, labels, narratives) were looked at to determine the overall slant of the story. Trends within each theme were separately observed across 4 dimensions (in aggregate, across newspapers, across time, and across newspapers over time). Both *Dawn* and *The News* were observed to be predominantly neutral in their use of language, facts, and labels. Both newspapers cited more pro-PTI sources but their narrative framing differed: *Dawn* leaned towards more positive narratives, while *The News* maintained a neutral stance. Nuanced trends were uncovered in time series analysis. *Dawn's* positive language use peaked in mid-December, and fluctuated before reaching a moderate level near election day, while its presentation of pro-PTI narratives and sources increased in January. Conversely, *The News* adopted a more critical stance, with a rise in negative language, and the presentation of anti-PTI facts and sources from late January onward. Overall, both newspapers provided a balanced, objective and neutral perspective, which aligned less with the hegemonic perspective and more with their watchdog role.

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Introduction

The role of mass media in the electoral process is one of significance. It bridges the gap between “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” (Lippmann, 1922). However, the effect of mass media goes beyond these “pictures of reality”, and can influence voting behavior of individuals on election day (McCombs, 2002).

According to Kelley (1962), the media does many different things during elections, including selectively transmitting campaign propaganda to the public. But through deliberation and watchdog journalism, the media can also shed light on systemic abuses of power and bring transparency and accountability to the electoral process (Venturelli, 1998). Media has the power to “both legitimise the actions of the powerful, and facilitate change at the collective level, but can also limit and shape the behaviors of individuals which are central to wider social change” (Happer & Philo, 2013). This can significantly shape voter perception as reliance on the press for information increases, and “determining the way that an issue is framed... can significantly influence the ultimate outcome” (McCombs, 2002).

In the context of Pakistan’s political landscape, the 2024 General Elections was highly significant due to the turmoil surrounding one of the largest political parties in the country, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Imran Khan, who was serving his term as Prime Minister following the 2018 General Elections, was ousted from office after losing a no-confidence vote in April, 2022. In October of the same year, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) disqualified Khan as a member of parliament after he was charged with illegally selling state gifts. May 9th, 2023 marks the day when Khan was arrested in a corruption case which triggered nationwide protests as his supporters blamed the military for orchestrating it. These

events raised questions about the state's involvement in delegitimizing the identity of the party.

Zahid Hussain's observation, which he wrote in an op-ed for *Dawn* on May 24, 2023, speaks to the gravity of the situation: "The May 9 mayhem provided the establishment a justification to strike back with a severity not witnessed in recent times". Sana Chaudhry, another writer for *Dawn*, wrote in an article on January 2, 2024, "The state's wrath over the events was evident", as PTI leaders started quitting the party or politics altogether after being arrested. Later that year, Khan was barred from politics for five years by the ECP. Hence, President Arif Alvi dissolved the country's National Assembly and a caretaker government was put in place under Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar.

PTI was directed by the ECP to hold intra-party polls within 20 days or lose their iconic 'cricket bat' symbol, which PTI voiced concerns against due to a lack of a level playing field. Khan decided not to contest the polls and nominated Barrister Gohar Khan for the top slot who was elected unopposed as PTI chairman. However, the ECP called their intra-party polls unconstitutional, stripped PTI's electoral symbol, and rejected the party's nomination papers, forcing PTI-backed candidates to contest as independents. Imran Khan was charged in a number of cases over the course of one week during January, 2024.

This duality between the state's actions and PTI's assertions of victimhood underscored the narrative battles unfolding in the media landscape. Understanding how the media framed PTI's legitimacy and identity becomes imperative as the media's role as agenda setters and power to frame reality is amplified during uncertain times.

Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to analyze how the print media shaped the legitimacy and identity of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) during the 2024 General Elections. By examining the language, sources, facts, labels, and narratives used in media coverage, this research sought to determine the extent to which the media aligned with the putative hegemonic view or performed a watchdog role.

Significance of Study

This study contributes to the understanding of media influence on political legitimacy and identity in Pakistan, particularly in light of the recent 2024 General Elections. Analyzing media narratives during this time allows for the dynamics between political parties and the media to be understood. Given the heightened political polarization and the challenges to democratic processes in Pakistan leading up to the 2024 G.E, the findings can inform policymakers, journalists, and scholars about the responsibilities of media during election times.

Research Question

RQ1: To what extent did the media align with the hegemonic views versus fulfilling a watchdog role in their portrayal of PTI's legitimacy and identity?

Literature Review

One of the original studies that explored the concept of agenda setting by the media was conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the 1968 US presidential elections. They examined Walter Lipmann's idea of "the pictures in our heads", where objects presented by the news media influence the public's perception of those objects. Since then, numerous studies have been published worldwide which document the media's ability to influence public discourse and political agendas and vice versa.

In a cross-sectional analysis of the UK and Netherlands, Van Noije et al. (2008) found evidence for the media's influence on parliamentary agenda and Hameleers and Vliegenthart (2019) suggest a nuanced relationship between media and populist narratives, finding that while populist rhetoric was not overtly dominant, there was a noticeable increase especially during election times, confirming prior empirical findings (Rooduijn, 2014, as cited in Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020).

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) explored the framing of political issues in national media outlets, suggesting "the importance and potential influence of political culture and context on the framing of problems and topics in the news." This can shape the way audiences interpret and respond to political issues. Boukes (2021) further focused on the effect of episodic framing on public perceptions of responsibility for the 2009-2015 economic crisis in the Netherlands, finding a decline in the attribution of responsibility to individual citizens. According to Boukes (2021), framing effects are conditional on political ideology, which ultimately highlights the role of media framing in shaping political attitudes. The dominance of episodic framing in television news is also highlighted by Iyengar (1996) who

said that while influencing public perception of responsibility, it can also protect political elites from accountability by “reducing complex issues to the level of anecdotal cases.” In this way, the media is “a contested space in which the most powerful groups can establish the dominance of specific messages” (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Hopmann et al. (2012) found that “the media are not independent actors acting autonomously but are engaged in an interaction with political actors who are their central sources in election campaign coverage.” They went on to further Sartori’s (2005) notion that the success of a party’s press release is directly proportional to how relevant the party is.

This idea is prevalent in Herman and Chomsky’s book titled *Manufacturing Consent*, where they reject the notion that the media acts as a check on political power. They outlined a propaganda model which focuses on the “inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices” (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 61). The news stories pass through five successive filters, and only the “cleansed residue” is published. The first filter is ownership, which refers to the fact that mass media firms are big corporations, part of bigger conglomerates, and their interests lie in maximizing profit which influences the content they produce. The second filter is advertising, which can result in self-censorship as outlets rely heavily on its revenue. The third filter is sourcing, which focuses on the reliance of media on official sources, and how the establishment manages media. The system of journalism encourages complicity so it can’t be a check on power; those in power influence the news narrative and make themselves a part of the process of journalism by providing ‘official accounts’. The fourth filter is flak, which refers to the negative pressures that media outlets face when they deviate from set narratives. Those in power may discredit sources or divert conversation when the story is inconvenient for them. To avoid flak and maintain financial stability, media organizations may refrain from controversial or critical stories. The

final filter is one of a common enemy, or an ideological bias, because to manufacture consent you need a target, and the media promotes the dominant ideologies of their owners. The agenda is set in many ways, including emphasis, framing of issues, and the filtering of information. These filters work together to shape, control, and restrict content to serve the interests of the elite.

Politicians can also use mass media to attract voters. Mun and Li (2011) investigated news reports leading up to the 2008 Malaysian General Election and found that “there is a presence of agenda setting in the news reporting on the issues raised by politicians.” Their finding concludes that “the media can transfer salience of the object agenda” (Mun & Li, 2011).

Various studies have also been conducted exploring political discourse and media coverage in Pakistan, generating awareness about the dynamics of political communication and agenda-setting within the country. According to Khan (2009), the Pakistani media has the potential to become a “trendsetter” for social and political discourse in the country, given the increasing mediatization of politics.

Analysis of political talk shows (Khan et al., 2019) and political speeches (Iqbal, 2018) found evidence of agenda setting and offered “[an] opportunity to get familiar with [the] disposition of Pakistani political discourse” (Iqbal, 2018). Several content analyses of print media during election times (e.g. Chaudhry & Ashraf, 2012; Ahmed & Hussain, 2016; Toor & Saleem, 2020) found differences in coverage patterns and tilts towards parties and government policies, providing insights into how public discourse is shaped during election

periods. Jan et al. (2013) also found that disproportionate coverage of one single party indicates the potential of the media to influence public perceptions.

The media has the ability to dramatize elections and transmit campaign propaganda (Kelley, 1962). However, the dynamics of agenda-setting can only be fully understood with labels. According to Bhatia (2005), the “ability to name, and to have that name accepted by an audience, holds great power.” This widens the understanding of language, as “the act of naming is always a highly charged process that can have serious political and social consequences” (Jackson, 2005).

Labels within political discourse are used to affirm identities, recruit supporters and justify action (Bhatia, 2005). They perpetuate the designation of “the other”, what Cammaerts (2012) refers to as “framing wars” — the conflict between competing meanings with us/them dichotomies. This naming of the other is conditioned by a layered discursive structure (Barrinha, 2010). Many studies have been conducted globally which look at how political actors use labels to shape public perceptions and gain an advantage over their opponents.

Bale et al. (2011) examined the use of the term populism in the UK print media and found it used as a pejorative to discredit and negatively label the political opposition. The use of negative labels can be a “deliberate rejection of the values and ideology associated with the group” but also a rejection of reality (Ette & Joe, 2019). Van den Broek (2015) further examined this in his study, and demonstrated that some groups actively challenge being labeled as deviants by “develop[ing] counter-labels instead to define their opponents and re-label themselves.”

One of the media's duties is to keep people informed and serve as a watchdog on the government's activities (Fatoba, 2012, as cited in Dauda, 2018). Citizens haven't the means to personally gather information about the governmental institutions that affect them, hence it's the press's job to scrutinize and report on them (Hale, 1977, as cited in Weiderman, 2009). As Francke (1995) put it, "The mass media's influence on the ethics of public life, as characterized by the press's watchdog role in monitoring the conduct of government officials, is assumed to be vital to democracy." However, the media can struggle if they don't have some political openness, what Pintak (2008) calls the "Catch-22 of press freedom".

The media's watchdog role aligns with the principles of proactive agenda setting, a professional perspective also known as public journalism, which prioritizes public service and community engagement. McCombs (1997) argues that media's proactive agenda setting should be used to strengthen bonds between citizens and their government, building community through sustained communication. According to Glasser and Craft (2002), public journalism challenges traditional journalistic objectivity; instead, it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of politics by expanding political coverage to include citizen voices.

This perspective sees journalism as an essential part of democracy by recognizing citizens as active participants (Glasser & Craft, 2002). Rosen (1998, as cited in Haas, 2007) suggested that journalists should strive to "help form as well as inform the public," reinforcing that idea that media can strengthen communication and democratic values within communities.

Similarly, Dauda (2018) highlights how media has contributed to the sustainability of democracy by educating the masses on governmental responsibilities and the consequences of policy decisions; in this way, "media serve as a yard stick to measure whether a government has performed or not, which invariably determine the voting behaviour/pattern of

the citizens” (Dauda, 2018). Interestingly, Chan and Suen (2009) found that even biased media coverage serves an important social function, calling it “counterproductive” to report uncritically.

Moreover, there is also a relationship of mutual dependency between social movements and mass media: movements rely on media to amplify their claims, while media focuses on movements because they generate news stories (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012).

Scholars have focused on the role of ‘collective identity’ when studying the mobilizing potential of mass media. This identity is often built in opposition to a perceived ‘other’. These frames, strongly affected by media, bring about a sense of agency among people (Gamson, 1995). “Media are key for movements” (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012), as they can turn individuals into participants.

Rohlinger (2002) saw how organizations strategically constructed media frames, adjusting their strategies based on the political context. This backs up Terkildsen et al. (1998), who claimed that while sometimes media may invent frames, organizations play a more significant role in producing issue frames. However, they also went on to say that the media gets more active as the conflict and issue broaden and mature. Mattoni and Treré (2014) presented a conceptual framework for understanding the media practices of social movement organizations before, during, and after mobilization, while Fisher et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of social networks in mobilizing individuals. Recent studies have also looked into the significant impact of the mediated channels of social media in mobilizing social movements (Lopes, 2014; Kidd & McIntosh, 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Wang, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

In 1922, Walter Lipmann explained how media messages construct the “pictures in our heads” in his book *Public Opinion*, but it wasn’t until 1972 that Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw gave that phenomenon the name of ‘agenda setting’. Their pioneering study on the 1968 US presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina found a significant correlation between the media and the public’s agenda of issues. Hence, agenda setting is “the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others” (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147). This concept is now referred to as the ‘first level’ of agenda setting. The ‘second level’ of agenda setting focuses on the attributes which describe issues or the “transfer of attribute salience for those issues and many other “objects” such as political figures” (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147). This second level has two dimensions: the substantive and the affective. The substantive attributes include various aspects of topics and each topic can take on an affective tone, which is its emotional quality. For example, in their study of the 1996 Spanish national election, McCombs et al. (2000), found the substantive dimension of political candidates to include ideology/issue positions, biographical details, perceived qualifications, integrity, and personality and image, while the affective dimension measured whether each of those substantive elements was described in a positive, neutral, or negative tone.

Like this second level of agenda setting, framing also brings attention to the way certain issues are highlighted and shaped. Both are macro-level mechanisms dealing with message construction, but framing takes more interest in how society shapes discourse

around an issue with predominant labels (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Frames help make complex topics more accessible to audiences.

Literature has also mentioned the concept of priming, which has been referred to as the “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Some have argued for a streamlined understanding of framing, priming and agenda setting by including all 3 concepts under the broader umbrella of agenda setting. McCombs (2004), for instance, has suggested that framing is simply a more nuanced version of agenda setting.

The mediatization of politics can either increase politicians’ responsiveness to the media or reduce their monopoly over news coverage (Van Noije et al., 2008). According to Ridout and Mellen (2007), campaign coverage is reactive as journalists only report what’s taking place, while Dalton et al. (1998), claimed agendas stem from “the interaction of social actors; each actor is constrained by the others and by the flow of actual political events.”

Methods

Research Design & Selection Criterion

The research involved a descriptive exploration using content analysis, which is a systematic research technique for “making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). The data was selected from the online news archive of the two largest Pakistani English newspapers in

circulation, which are *Dawn* and *The News*. The agenda and general framework are set by the national media that the local media more or less adapt to (Chomsky, 1992).

The front page news stories which contained mention of PTI's legitimacy and identity were selected, which is the unit of analysis in this research. In this research, legitimacy refers to PTI's perceived rightfulness and its presentation as a valid political entity by the media. Legitimacy is indicated by "the centrality of social expectations that define the relationship between object and audience" (Schoon, 2022). In other words, legitimacy is established by the alignment between the object and a given set of norms or expectations. Schoon (2022) emphasized that the focus is on the audience's perception of conformity, regardless of trust. He found that three elements are necessary: "an audience, an object of legitimacy, and a set of expectations that define the relationship between the two" (Schoon, 2022).

According to Kurzman (2004), legitimacy is not a fixed property, but rather subject to change depending on the perception that an alternative is available. Therefore, the media coverage was examined to assess discussions on PTI's adherence to legal and ethical standards, such as anti-corruption measures, and how frequently PTI's actions were portrayed in relation to societal values like justice and accountability.

Identity refers to the characteristics, labels, and roles attributed to PTI by the media, which can shape public perception of its legitimacy. Identity can have many dimensions including political stance, ideological alignment and perceived roles.

The front page stories were selected as this is the content given the most promotion. The selected time period was from 15th December, 2023 to 6th February, 2024. The reason for this selection is, on 15th December, 2023, the Election Commission of Pakistan released the Election Program, which marks the official date of the announcement of election day. Similarly, according to election rules, campaigning ended on 6th February, 2024, making this

time period appropriate for data collection as it covers the official campaigning period allotted by the ECP. In total, 191 stories were selected: 89 from *Dawn* and 102 from *The News*.

The data was coded into five themes: language, sources, facts, labels, and narratives. Each theme was measured using five variables: total count, negative (bias against PTI), neutral, positive (bias towards PTI), and a trichotomous variable based on the previous three variables. The total count variable reflects the overall frequency of that theme, regardless of slant. The negative variable measures instances biased against PTI, the neutral variable measures objective and emotionless instances, and the positive variable measures instances biased towards PTI. The trichotomous variable takes on the values -1 (if positive counts were predominant), 0 (if neutral counts were predominant), or 1 (if negative counts were predominant).

A qualitative analysis was conducted to categorize specific words and phrases within these themes into the respective variables. Each hypothesis was tested in four ways: in aggregate, across newspapers, across time, and across newspapers over time. For the time series analyses, counts were converted into percentages to eliminate count bias before making comparisons.

Hypotheses

H1: English newspapers' coverage of PTI leading up to the 2024 General Elections predominantly aligned with the hegemonic perspective.

- H1a: Language predominantly challenges PTI's identity and legitimacy, aligning with hegemonic perspective

- H1b: Sources cited in the media predominantly reflect voices aligning with the hegemonic perspective
- H1c: Facts presented predominantly affirm the hegemonic perspective on PTI's legitimacy and identity
- H1d: Labels were predominantly used to challenge PTI and its identity, aligning with the hegemonic perspective
- H1e: Media narratives predominantly favor the hegemonic framing of PTI's legitimacy and identity

Conceptualization and Operationalization

Theme: Language

Conceptual definition:

This theme refers to the broader descriptive phrasing used to present events or facts related to PTI's legitimacy or identity, which reflects a tone or attitude. It can include evaluative words or phrases that describe actions, focusing on how it is described rather than what is described. This theme considers the way certain choice of words emphasize a certain tone which can include analogies and metaphors.

Operational definition:

Positive variable:

These are descriptions that hold a valorizing quality to PTI's legitimacy or identity. These include phrases that suggest PTI is advocating for their political rights, acting in the interest of the people, behaving in a principled or noble way, and is being unjustly criticized.

Example: "righteous suffering" (*The News*, 28/12/2023)

Negative variable:

These are descriptions that undermine or cast doubt on PTI's legitimacy or identity. These include phrases that imply dysfunction, instability, wrongdoing, questioning PTI's competence and viability as a legitimate political party.

Example: "failed ideas", "dead end" (*The News*, 28/12/2023)

Neutral variable:

These are descriptions that objectively describe PTI's actions without judgment or emotional tone.

Example: "The appellant alleged that the RO rejected his papers only for his affiliation with the PTI." (*Dawn*, 2/1/2024)

Theme: Sources

Conceptual definition:

This theme refers to the general stance or viewpoint of the external sources cited within the article, in context of PTI's legitimacy or identity. It assesses whether the source expresses any explicit bias, and what the direction of that bias is.

Operational definition:

Positive variable:

Sources that provide factual or opinion based information that align positively with PTI's legitimacy or identity. Sources that provide favorable interpretations about PTI's actions, emphasize its achievements, validate its claims to political power, or reinforce its ideological identity are also included.

Example: PTI Chairman Gohar Ali Khan: "PTI is the only party which has been making efforts for elections for the last two years, but ECP has been trying to avoid it. We demand the ECP announce the election schedule within 24 hours," he said. (*Dawn*, 15/12/2023)

Negative variable:

Sources that exhibit a critical stance against PTI. Sources that critique or question PTI's legitimacy or identity as a political party, highlighting failures, corruption or mismanagement, and overall present the party in a negative light.

Example: Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) Senior Vice President and Chief Organiser Maryam Nawaz: “A terrorist group could not be given a political party's electoral symbol.” (*Dawn*, 16/1/2024)

Neutral variable:

These sources present factual, objective and balanced information that can apply universally to all parties rather than making any explicit or implicit judgements about PTI's legitimacy or identity. These sources are impartial and rely on institutional or legal viewpoints, and avoid taking sides or offering subjective interpretations.

Example: Judicial statements such as: Justice Athar Minallah: “It is, therefore, inevitable to ensure that every political competitor is treated equally without discrimination and everyone has the same chance to succeed.” (*The News*, 23/12/2023)

Theme: Facts

Conceptual definition:

Facts are objective, verifiable pieces of information based on observable events or data; they provide the evidentiary basis for claims. In the context of PTI's legitimacy and identity, facts refer to actual instances of political achievements, failures, controversies and other actions and events that can either support or undermine PTI's role as a legitimate political party.

Operational definition:

Positive variable:

These facts emphasize PTI's successes, achievements, or other verifiable instances that reinforce its legitimacy and identity as a competent political party.

Example: electoral victories, international recognition and endorsement

Negative variable:

These facts emphasize PTI's failures, controversies or other verifiable instances that challenge PTI's legitimacy or identity, portraying the party as incompetent or ineffective.

Example: internal party conflict, corruption charges

Neutral variable:

These facts present neutral information that neither support nor undermine PTI's legitimacy or identity.

Example: election dates, candidate announcement

Theme: Labels

Conceptual definition:

Labels reduce complex subjects to single ideas and shapes perceptions (Barrinha, 2011). According to Bhatia (2005), labels within political discourse are used to affirm identities, recruit supporters and legitimize or delegitimize specific political groups. Hence,

this theme refers to the explicit terms or phrases used to name or categorize PTI, its members, and actions in relation to its legitimacy and identity. These labels can carry connotations that either affirm PTI's role as a legitimate political actor or undermine its credibility.

Operational definition:

Positive variable:

These are terms or phrases that affirm PTI's legitimacy and identity, portraying it as a legitimate political party. These can include sympathetic terms that display PTI as a victim of injustice, facing unfair opposition.

Example: "Beleaguered", "Deprived" (*Dawn*, 2/2/2024)

Negative variable:

These are terms or phrases that explicitly criticize, undermine, or discredit PTI's legitimacy and identity, portraying it as a flawed or illegitimate political party. These can include terms that are accusatory or dismissive, casting PTI as undesirable and the perpetrator of wrongdoings.

Example: "Persona non grata" (*Dawn*, 2/2/2024)

Neutral variable:

These are terms or phrases that don't carry any emotional tone; they are factual or commonly accepted names or categorizations of PTI without implying judgment.

Example: “Former chairman PTI” (*The News*, 8/1/2024)

Theme: Narratives

Conceptual definition:

This refers to the overall storyline within which facts, language, labels, and sources are placed. Narratives guide the overall interpretation of the information in the article through the texture of the text. “Texture in written text arises as the writer attempts to monitor and control the flow of information through the text in a manageable way so that the reader is guided towards the kind of interpretation intended by the writer” (Forey & Thompson, 2009). This explains the broader context of how PTI’s legitimacy and identity are understood by creating a coherent storyline. By looking at how different elements were integrated and how the story was structured in a specific way, the overarching narrative of a story can be gauged.

Operational definition:

Positive variable:

These are accounts that place PTI in a positive light, as a force for positive change, emphasizing its legitimacy. These narratives are sympathetic to PTI and depict it as a resilient party navigating challenges and fighting for its political rights.

Negative variable:

These are accounts that portray PTI as a failing political party, emphasizing its internal divisions and actions that compromise its legitimacy. These include narratives that highlight PTI as weakened and unable to fulfill its promises through its own shortcomings.

Neutral variable:

These are accounts that provide a balanced, objective account that doesn't skew the interpretation in favor of, or against PTI. These narratives avoid subjective judgment and focus on a factual presentation of developments.

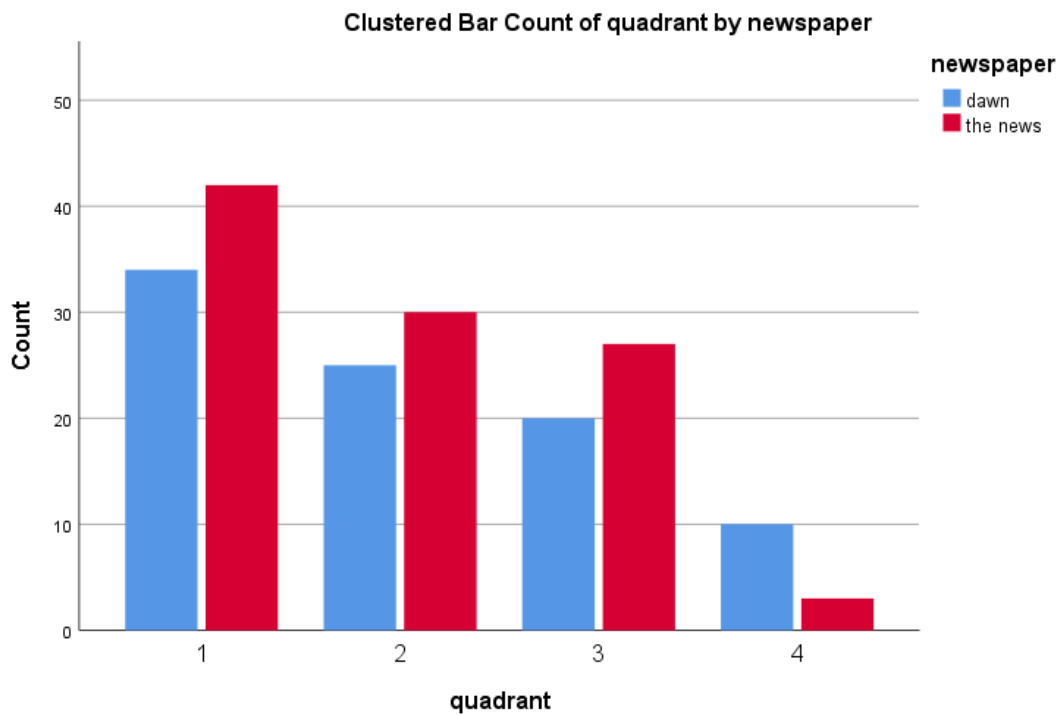
All front-page stories, within the time period, mentioning PTI's legitimacy or identity were first extracted by reading each story and assessing them based on the definitions of legitimacy and identity. For each story, its word count and placement (by quadrant) were also recorded. Newspapers are divided into 4 quadrants: the first quadrant is on the top left, the second quadrant is on the top right, the third quadrant is on the bottom left, and the fourth quadrant is on the bottom right (Lynch & Peer, 2002).

To code the stories, each was read carefully, and the frequency of each theme (language, sources, facts, labels, and narratives) was tallied based on the conceptual definitions, and the total was placed into the full count variable. Each tally was then categorized into its relevant variable (negative, positive, or neutral) according to the operational definitions.

After completing the tallies, each theme was assigned a code reflecting the most frequent variable for that theme. This code was recorded in the trichotomous variable, taking values of -1 if the positive variable was predominant, 0 if the neutral variable was predominant, or 1 if the negative variable was predominant. Each story was coded using this same process.

Findings

The mean number of words for *Dawn* was 772.83, while the mean number of words for *The News* was 816.16. Both newspapers utilized the first quadrant of the front page the most, with *Dawn* placing 44.7% of its stories, and *The News* placing 55.3% of its stories in the first quadrant.



Descriptives

newspaper			Statistic	Std. Error	
no. of words	Dawn	Mean	772.83	28.472	
		95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	716.25	
			Upper Bound	829.41	
		Median	741.00		
		Variance	72150.142		
		Std. Deviation	268.608		
		Range	1412		
the news		Mean	816.16	52.032	
		95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	712.94	
			Upper Bound	919.37	
		Median	719.50		
		Variance	276147.876		
		Std. Deviation	525.498		
		Range	2438		

Language

- H1a: Language predominantly challenges PTI's identity and legitimacy, aligning with hegemonic perspective.

Aggregate count - Dawn

During the time period, language used by *Dawn* to discuss and depict PTI's legitimacy and identity reveals a predominantly neutral tone, with 54.2% of the 611 language counts classified as neutral. Negative language accounted for 18.3% of the total, while positive language accounted for 27.5%. Although *Dawn* generally maintained neutral

language, its use of biased language tended to have a positive, rather than a negative slant as more positive language was used compared to negative language.

Dawn theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			
		positive	neutral	negative	Total
theme	language Count	168 _a	331 _a	112 _a	611
		27.5%	54.2%	18.3%	100.0%

Aggregate count - The News

Similarly, language used by *The News* to discuss and depict PTI's legitimacy and identity reflected a predominantly neutral stance. Out of 764 language counts, 60.7% were neutral, 19.9% were negative, and 19.4% were positive. This indicates that *The News* used neutral language majority of times when referring to the PTI; use of biased language was almost equally divided between negative and positive representations.

The News theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			
		positive	neutral	negative	Total
theme	language Count	148 _a	464 _a	152 _a	764
		19.4%	60.7%	19.9%	100.0%

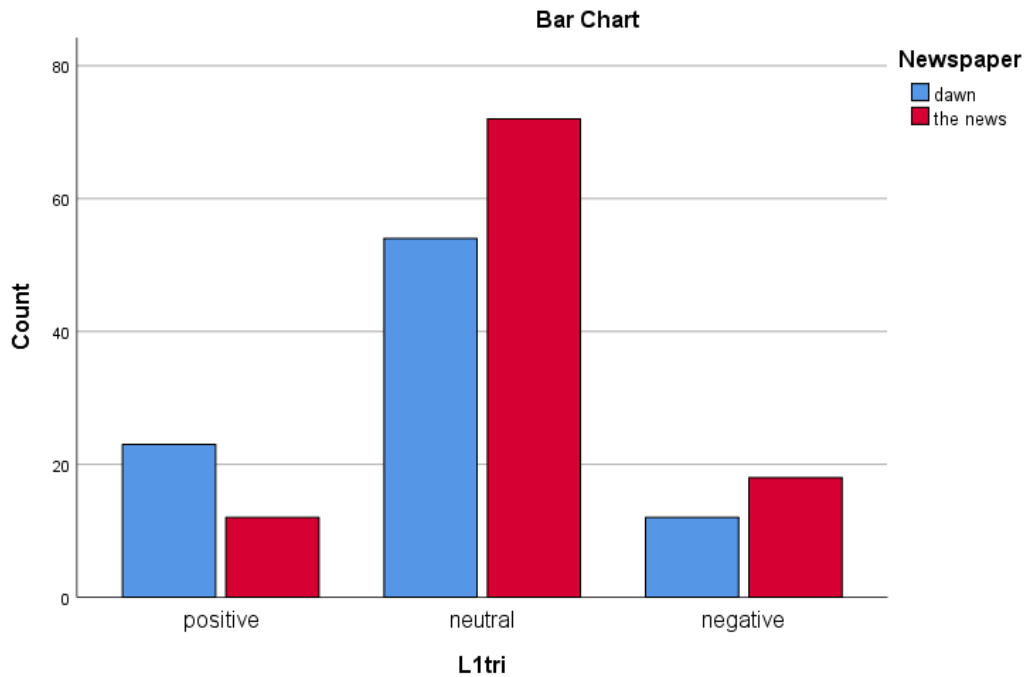
Across Newspapers

Overall, the language used in both *Dawn* and *The News* was predominantly neutral. Specifically, 60.7% and 70.6% of the stories in *Dawn* and *The News*, respectively, used

neutral language. However, there were notable differences in the stories that used biased language. *Dawn* employed more positive language (25.8%) compared to *The News* (11.8%), while *The News* used more negative language (17.6%) compared to *Dawn* (13.5%). *Dawn* showed a greater tendency to use positive language compared to *The News*, who used more negative language.

L1tri * Newspaper Crosstabulation

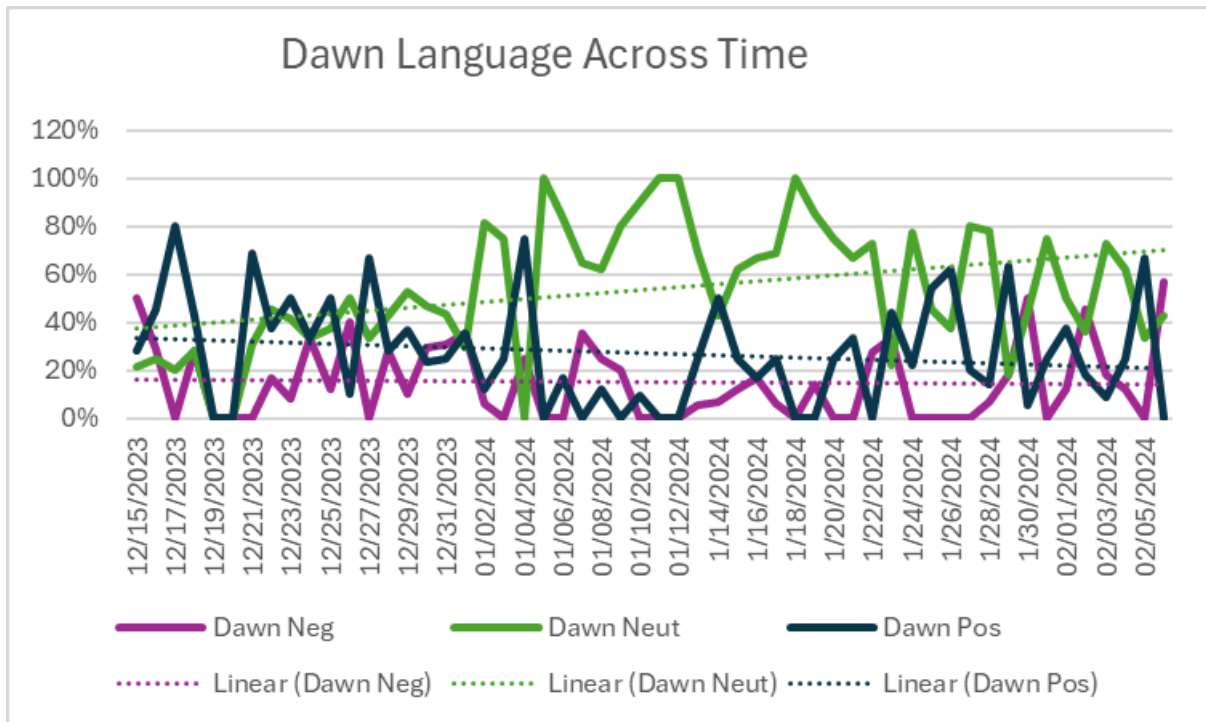
		Newspaper		
		Dawn	the news	Total
L1tri positive	Count	23	12	35
	% within L1tri	65.7%	34.3%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	25.8%	11.8%	18.3%
neutral	Count	54	72	126
	% within L1tri	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	60.7%	70.6%	66.0%
negative	Count	12	18	30
	% within L1tri	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	13.5%	17.6%	15.7%
Total	Count	89	102	191
	% within L1tri	46.6%	53.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Across Time

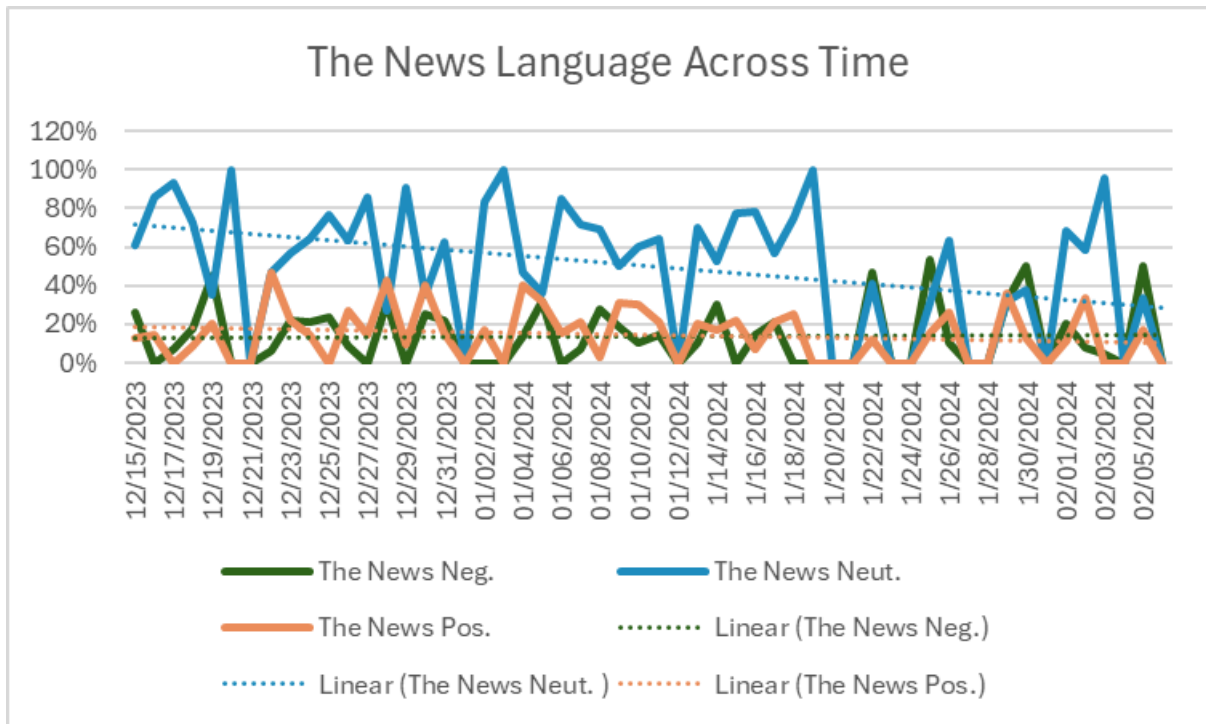
Language – Dawn

In *Dawn*, neutral language usage was relatively lower at the beginning but increased steadily from January onward. The best-fit line for neutral language indicates an overall increase. Positive language in *Dawn* was slightly higher initially but decreased as January progressed, followed by a slight increase later in the month. The best-fit line for positive language shows a gradual decrease over time. Negative language usage remained the lowest and most consistent throughout the observed period, with no significant changes as indicated by its best-fit line.



Language – The News

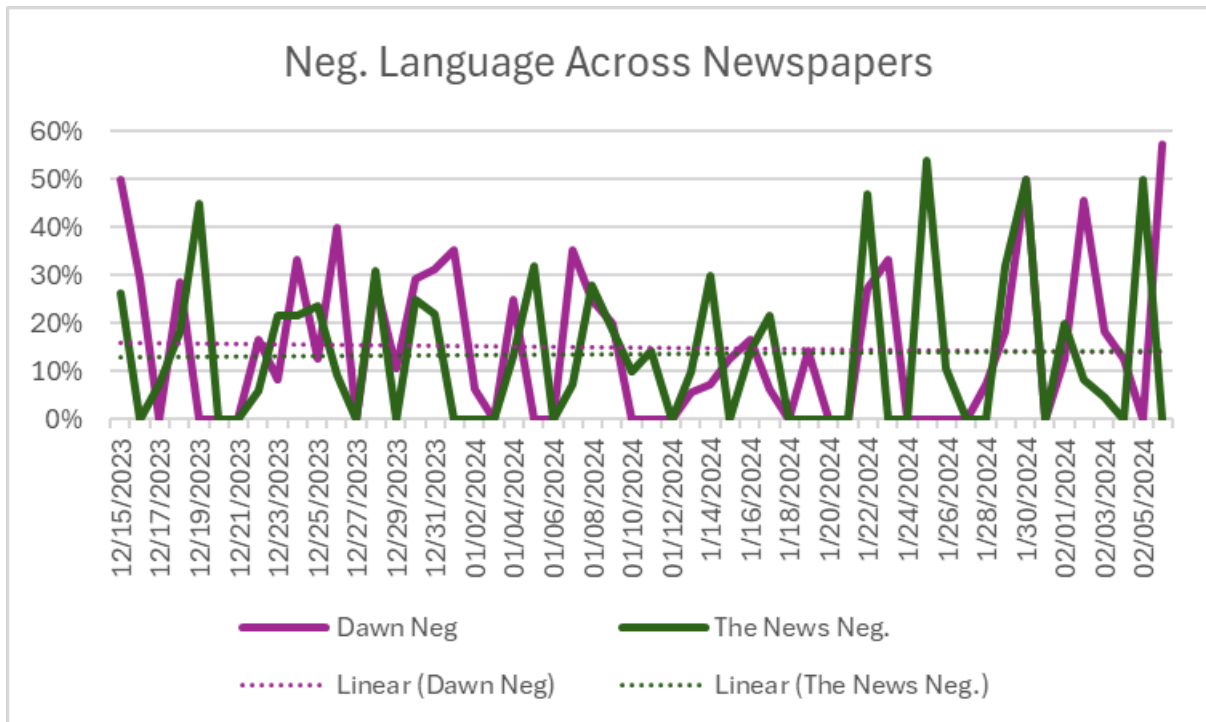
In *The News*, neutral language usage was the highest and remained consistent for most of the observed period but decreased significantly toward the end of January. Positive and negative language usage remained relatively consistent throughout the time period. The best-fit line for neutral language indicates a downward trend, while the best-fit line for positive language shows a slight downward trend. Conversely, the best-fit line for negative language suggests a slight upward trend over time.



Across Time and Newspapers

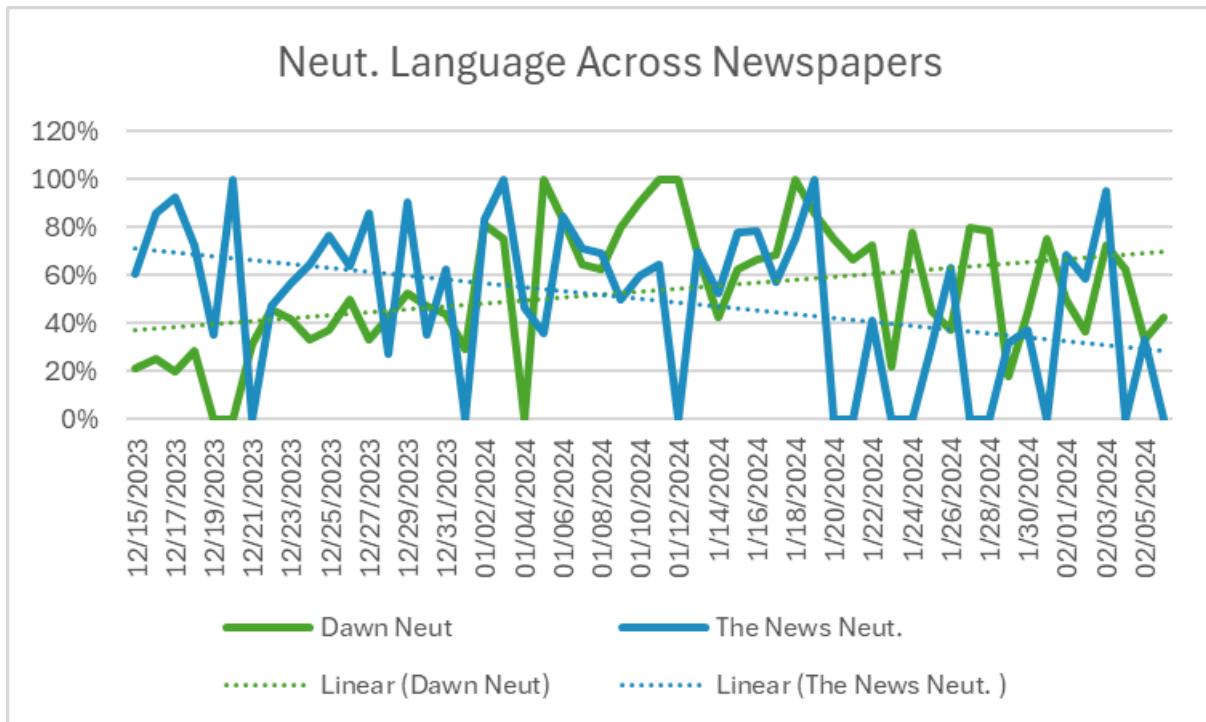
Language - Negative

In both *Dawn* and *The News*, negative language followed similar trends, with a noticeable spike in usage after January 20th for both newspapers. The best-fit line for *Dawn* shows a small decrease in negative language over time, while the best-fit line for *The News* shows no significant change over time.



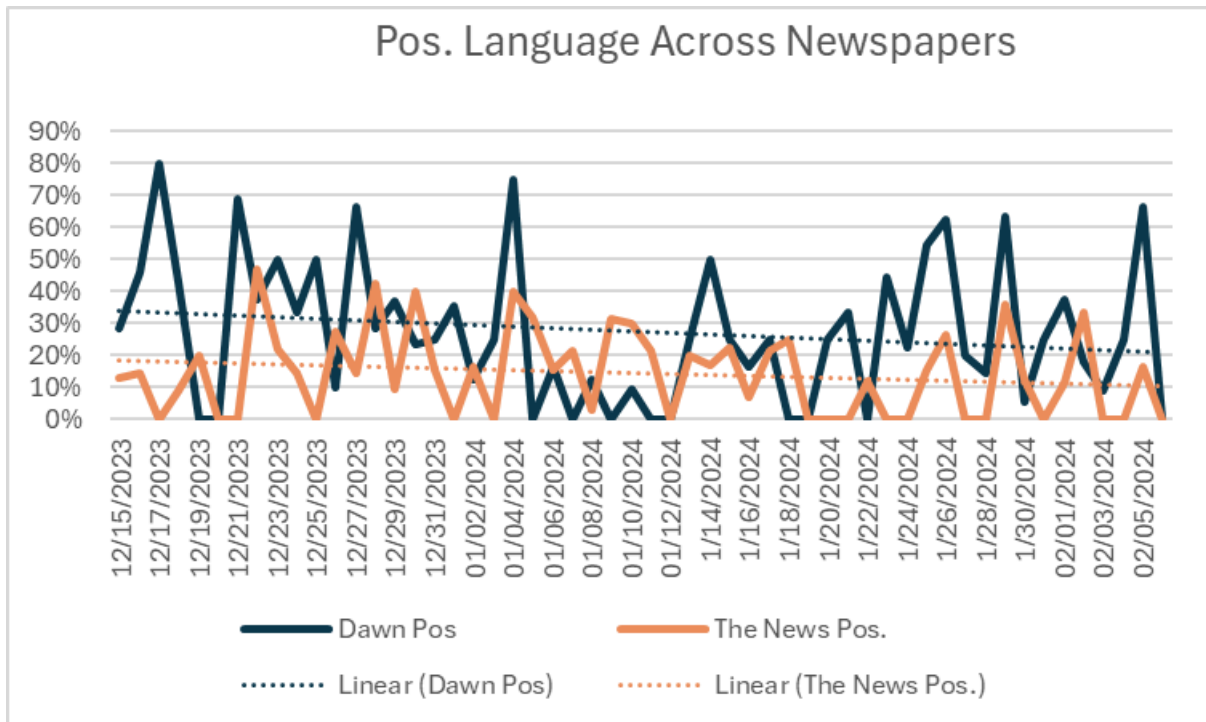
Language - Neutral

The News initially used more neutral language, but this decreased from January onwards. In contrast, *Dawn* had less neutral language at the start but saw an increase in January. The best-fit line for *Dawn* shows an overall increase in neutral language, while the best-fit line for *The News* shows a downward trend.



Language - Positive

Dawn used more positive language overall, with higher levels in the beginning, followed by a decrease in January and a slight increase in late January. In contrast, *The News* had a more consistent use of positive language. The best-fit line for *Dawn* indicates a decrease; while *The News* also shows a decrease, but it is considerably smaller compared to *Dawn*.



Key Findings for H1a

The analysis of language used by both *Dawn* and *The News* to depict PTI's identity and legitimacy reveals a predominantly neutral tone, with *Dawn* having 54.2% out of 611 counts, and *The News* having 60.7% out of 764 counts of language classified as neutral.

Of *Dawn's* 89 stories, 60.7% used predominantly neutral language, compared to 70.6% of *The News's* 102 stories. *Dawn* had a higher proportion of stories with predominantly positive language (25.8%) than *The News* (11.8%), while *The News* featured more stories with predominantly negative language (17.6%) compared to *Dawn* (13.5%). Notably, neutral language usage increased in *Dawn* over time, while *The News* experienced a decrease in neutral language towards the end of January. However, *Dawn* used more positive language relative to *The News*, which adopted a more balanced use of negative and positive language.

Sources

- H1b: Sources cited in the media predominantly reflect voices aligning with the hegemonic perspective

Aggregate count - Dawn

During the time period, sources cited by *Dawn* to discuss and depict PTI's legitimacy and identity used a predominantly positive tone, with 47.2% of the 358 source counts classified as positive. Neutral sources accounted for 32.1% of the total, while negative sources accounted for 20.7%. Though *Dawn* maintained a positive overall stance through their sources, they used more neutral than negative sources.

Dawn theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			Total
		positive	neutral	negative	
theme	sources Count	169 _a	115 _b	74 _c	358
	% within theme	47.2%	32.1%	20.7%	100.0%

Aggregate count - The News

During the time period, sources used by *The News* to discuss and depict PTI's legitimacy and identity were predominantly positive, with 46.3% of the 283 source counts classified as positive. Neutral sources accounted for 27.6%, while negative sources accounted for 26.1% of the total. Despite the predominant positive source usage, there was balance between neutral and negative sources.

The News theme * variable Crosstabulation

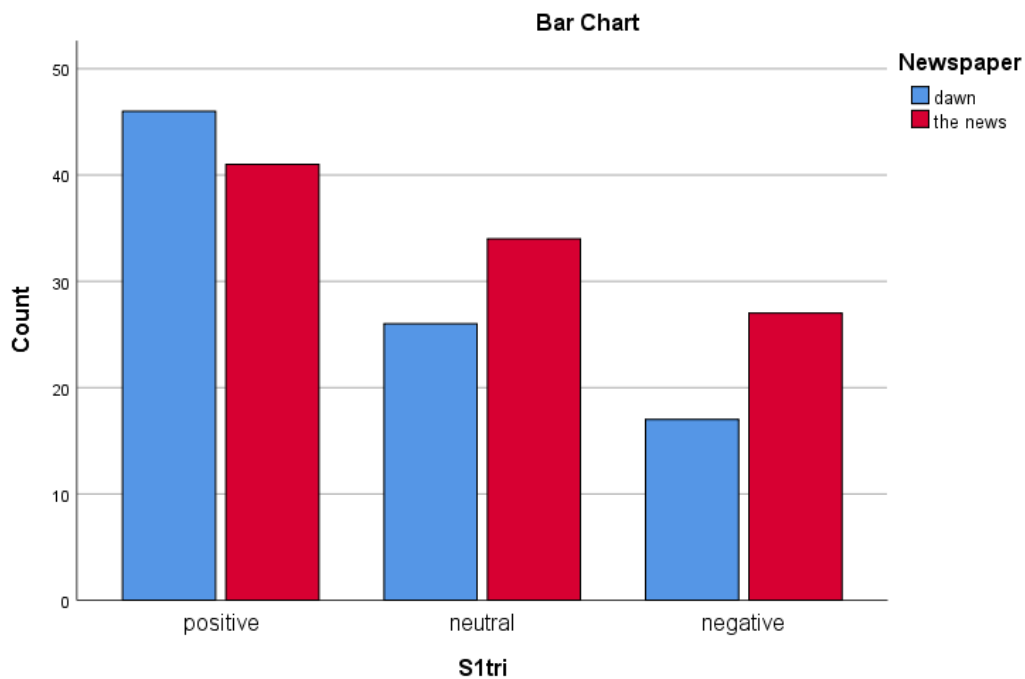
theme	language	Count	variable			Total
			positive	neutral	negative	
			131 _a	78 _b	74 _c	283
		% within theme	46.3%	27.6%	26.1%	100.0%

Across Newspapers

Across both newspapers, the sources referenced were predominantly positive regarding PTI. 51.7% of *Dawn's* stories had predominantly positive sources, while *The News* had 40.2%. However, in terms of negative and neutral sources, *The News* had a higher representation, with 26.5% negative and 33.3% neutral stories compared to *Dawn's* 19.1% negative and 29.2% neutral. Overall, while both newspapers used more positive sources, *Dawn* used more positive sources than *The News*, while *The News* utilized more negative and neutral sources compared to *Dawn*.

S1tri * Newspaper Crosstabulation

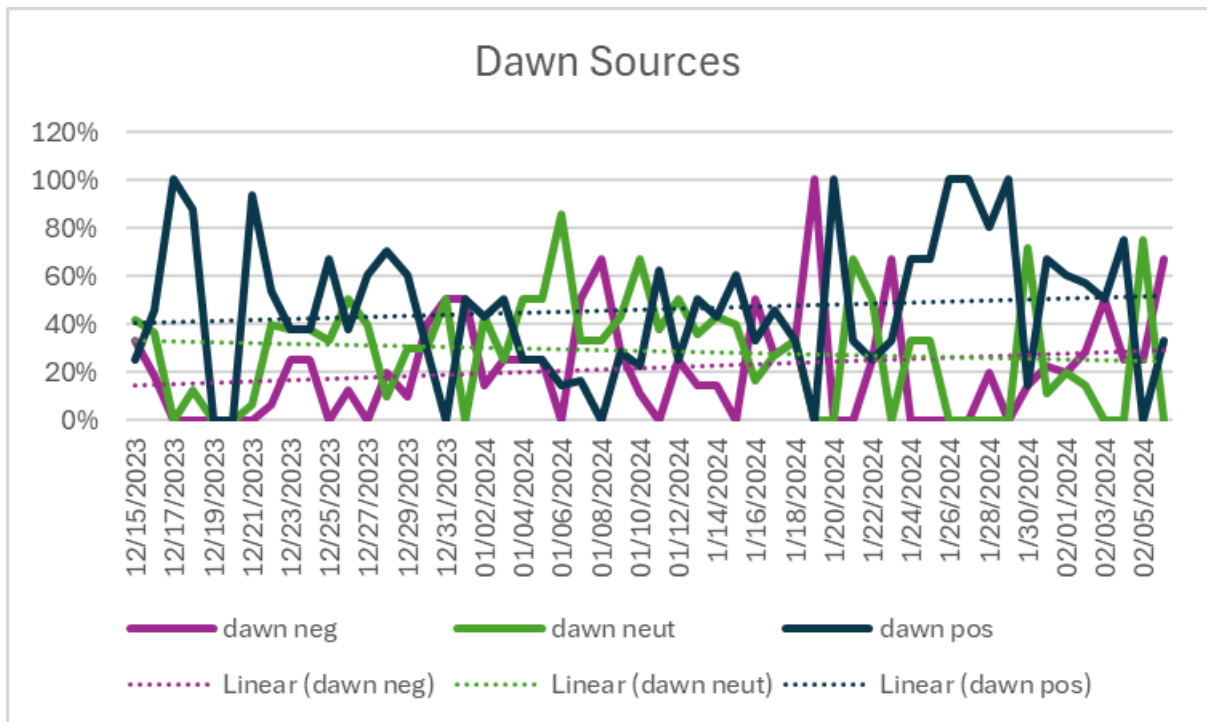
		Newspaper		
		Dawn	the news	Total
S1tri positive	Count	46	41	87
	% within S1tri	52.9%	47.1%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	51.7%	40.2%	45.5%
neutral	Count	26	34	60
	% within S1tri	43.3%	56.7%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	29.2%	33.3%	31.4%
negative	Count	17	27	44
	% within S1tri	38.6%	61.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	19.1%	26.5%	23.0%
Total	Count	89	102	191
	% within S1tri	46.6%	53.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Across Time

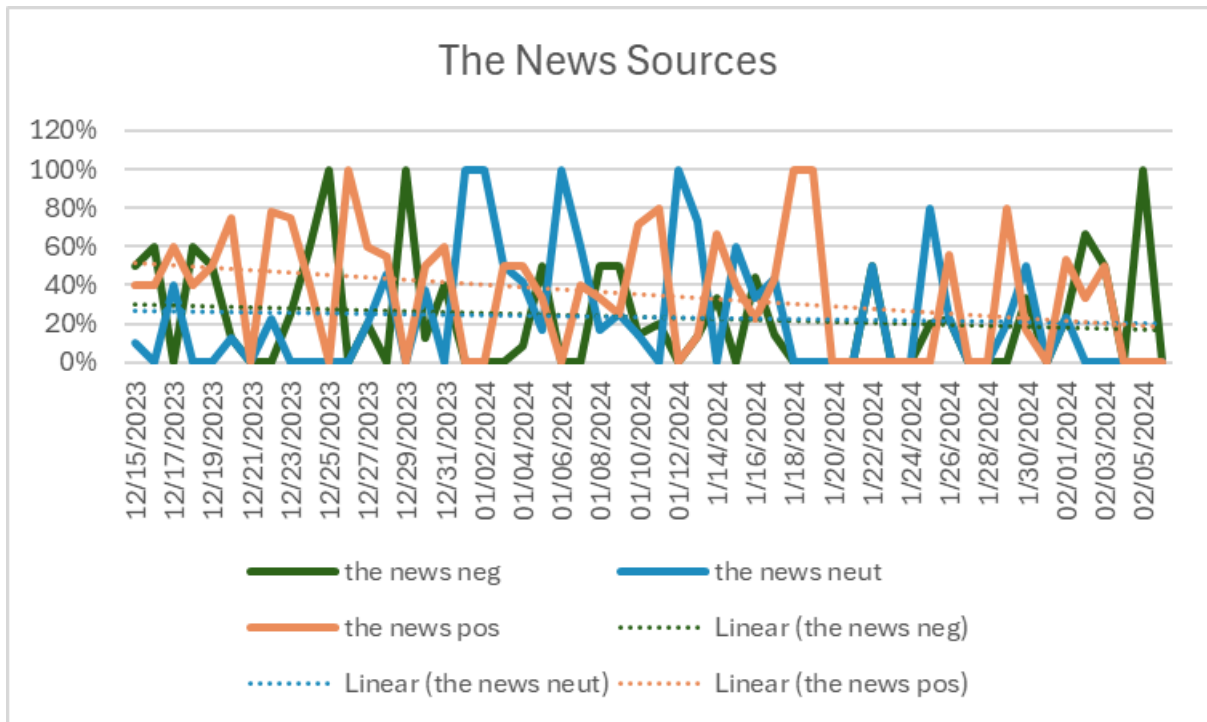
Sources – Dawn

For *Dawn*, there were more positive sources in December, followed by an increase in neutral sources in early January. In late January and early February, positive sources rose again. Negative sources remained the lowest overall, with only two notable instances of increase: once in early January and once in late January. Typically, negative sources were accompanied by an equivalent number of neutral sources and a greater quantity of positive sources. The best fit line for neutral sources indicates a slight downward trend, whereas the best fit line for positive sources shows a slight upward trend. The best fit line for negative sources also reflects a slight upward trend.



Sources - The News

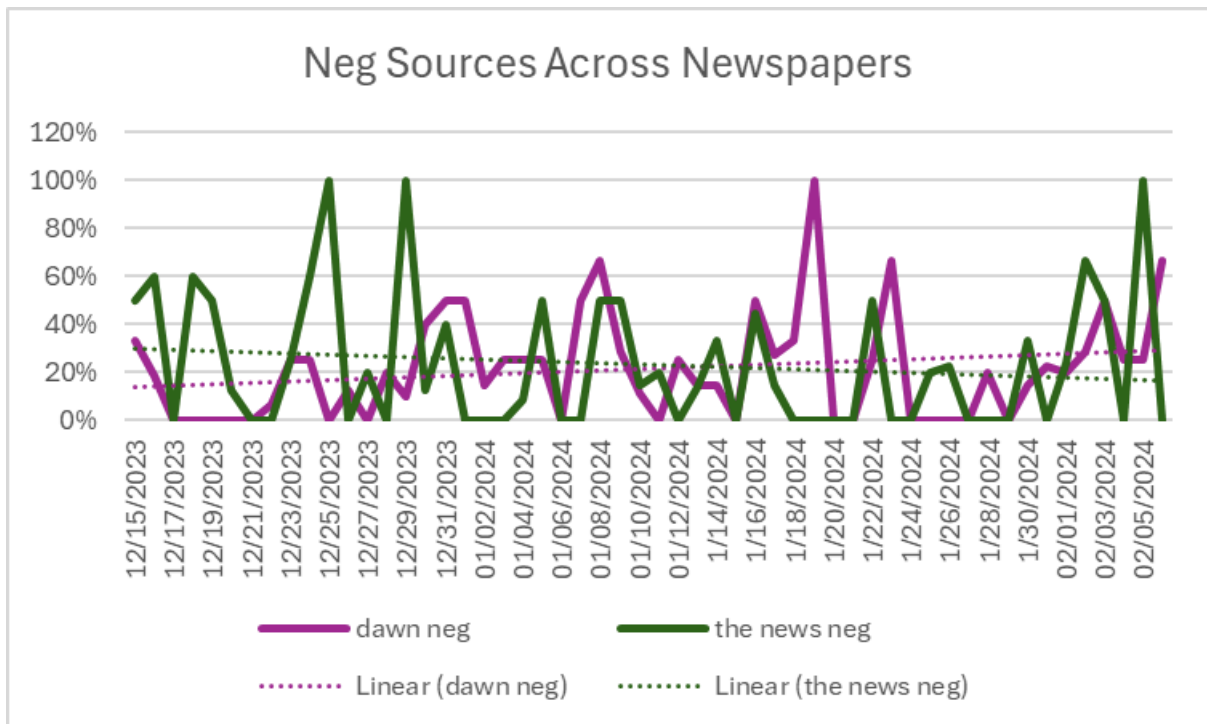
The News had fewer neutral sources in December, followed by an increase that peaked before decreasing again in mid-January. Positive sources were higher in December but then experienced a decline, with a subsequent increase later. Negative sources displayed erratic behavior, starting low before significantly increasing in late December, followed by a decrease to a consistent level, then another increase in early February. The best fit lines for negative, neutral and positive sources all indicate a slight downward trend.



Across Time and Newspapers

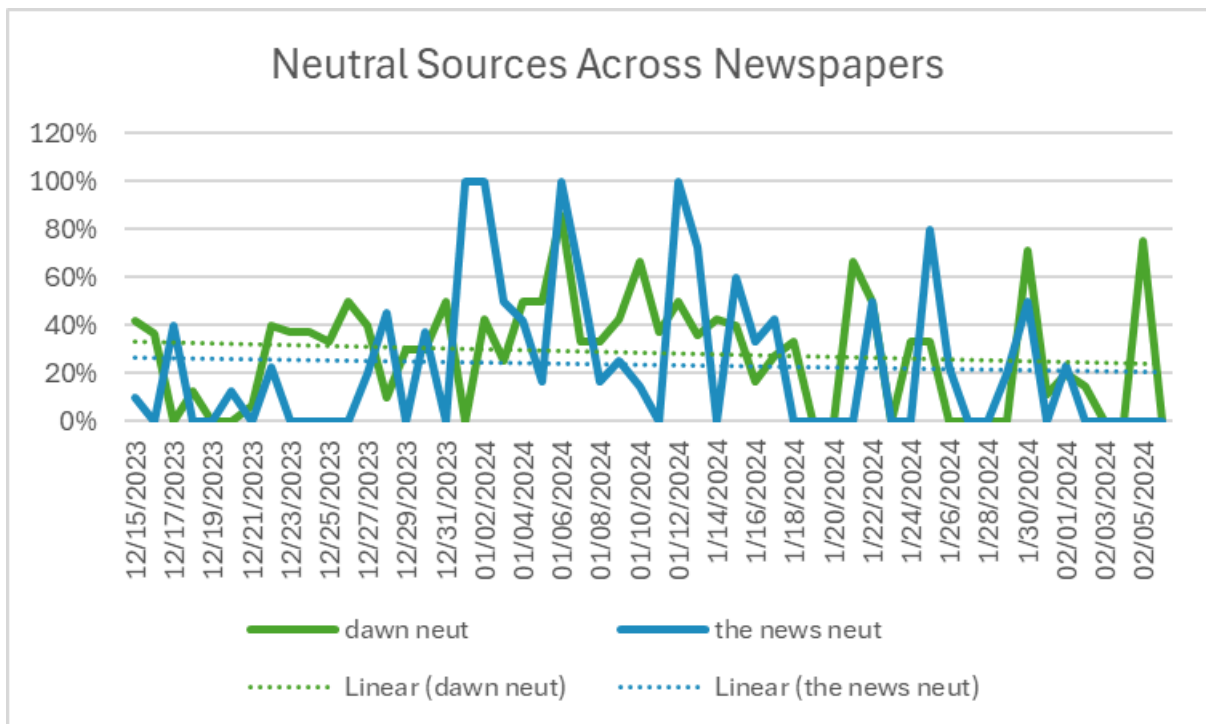
Sources – Negative

In December, *The News* had more negative sources compared to *Dawn*, but this figure decreased and remained consistent thereafter. In contrast, *Dawn* had fewer negative sources in December, followed by a slight increase in January before decreasing again in late January. The best fit line for *The News* indicates a downward trend, while the best fit line for *Dawn* shows an upward trend.



Sources – Neutral

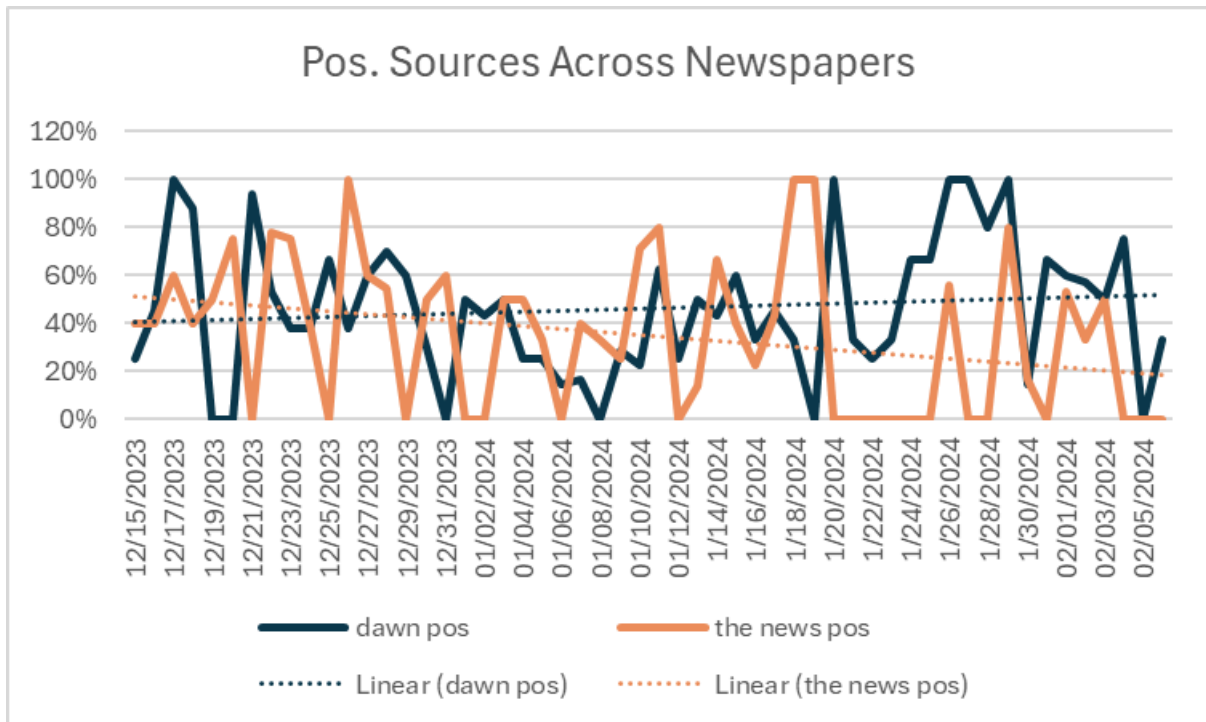
Both newspapers followed similar trends in their use of neutral sources. *The News* had fewer neutral sources in December, but this number increased in late December and remained relatively consistent thereafter. *Dawn* also had fewer neutral sources in December, with an increase in early January, maintaining a relatively consistent level thereafter. The best fit lines for both *Dawn* and *The News* indicate slight downward trends.



Sources – Positive

The News had a higher usage of positive sources in December; however, it decreased in early January, and increased again in late January, and then declined once more in February. In contrast, *Dawn* experienced a decline in positive sources from December to

mid-January, followed by an increase. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows an upward trend, while the best fit line for *The News* indicates a significant downward trend.



Key Findings of H1b

The analysis of media sources cited in both *Dawn* and *The News* reveals a predominantly positive tone regarding PTI's legitimacy and identity, with *Dawn* referencing 47.2% positive sources out of a total of 358 and *The News* referencing 46.3% positive sources out of a total of 283.

The use of neutral sources was slightly higher among the stories published in *The News* (33% stories), compared to *Dawn* (29.2%). *Dawn* also had a lower proportion of stories with negative sources (19.1%) compared to *The News* (26.5%). Over time, *Dawn* showed an upward trend in the use of positive sources, while *The News* experienced a decline. Neutral

sources in both newspapers followed a similar trajectory. While both newspapers predominantly cited positive sources, *Dawn* had a greater tendency of using positive sources, whereas *The News* incorporated a greater variety of sources, including negative and neutral perspectives.

Facts

- H1c: Facts presented predominantly affirm the hegemonic perspective on PTI's legitimacy and identity.

Aggregate count - Dawn

During the time period, the facts presented by *Dawn* predominantly maintained a neutral stance, with 70.6% of the 527 facts classified as neutral. Negative facts accounted for 13.3% of the total, while positive facts accounted for 16.1% of the total. Overall, the facts presented were neutral in tone.

Dawn theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			Total	
		positive	neutral	negative		
theme	language	Count	85 _a	372 _b	70 _c	527
		% within theme	16.1%	70.6%	13.3%	100.0%

Aggregate count - *The News*

During the time period, the facts presented by *The News* were predominantly neutral, with 79.1% of the 556 facts classified as neutral. Negative facts accounted for 10.8%, while positive facts accounted for 10.1%. Overall, the facts were neutral in nature.

The News theme * variable Crosstabulation

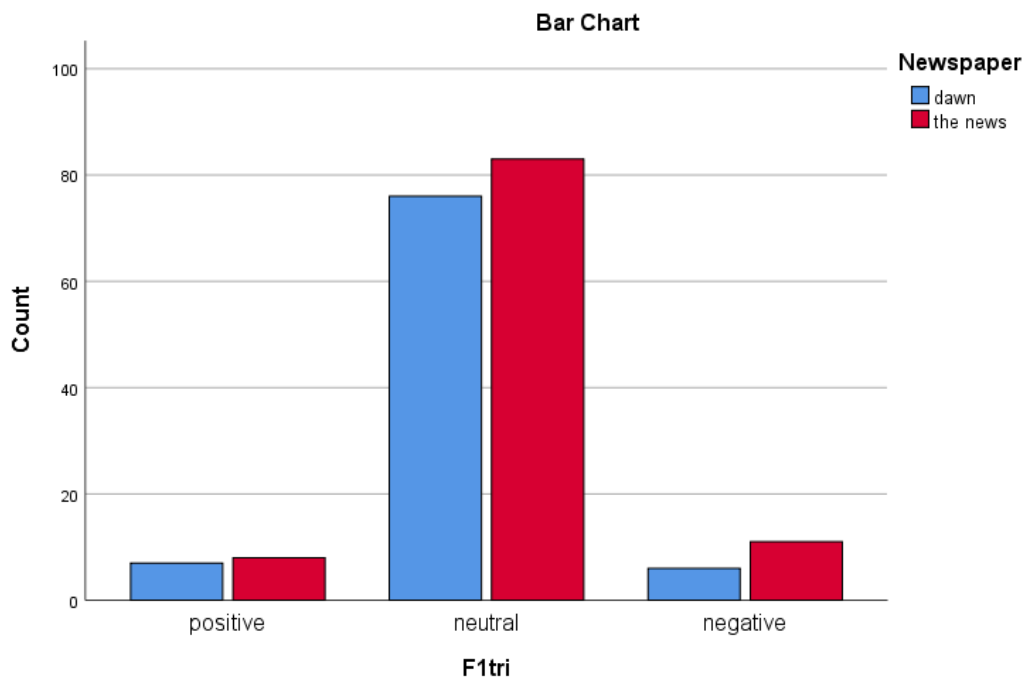
		variable			Total	
		positive	neutral	negative		
theme	language	Count	56 _a	440 _b	60 _a	556
		% within theme	10.1%	79.1%	10.8%	100.0%

Across Newspaper

Across both newspapers, the overall presentation of facts was neutral. 85.4% of *Dawn*'s stories had more neutral facts, while *The News* had 81.4%. Both newspapers showed a similar proportion of positively portrayed facts, *Dawn* with 7.9% of its stories and *The News* with 7.8%. However, *The News* included more stories with negatively portrayed facts (10.8%) compared to *Dawn* (6.7%).

F1tri * Newspaper Crosstabulation

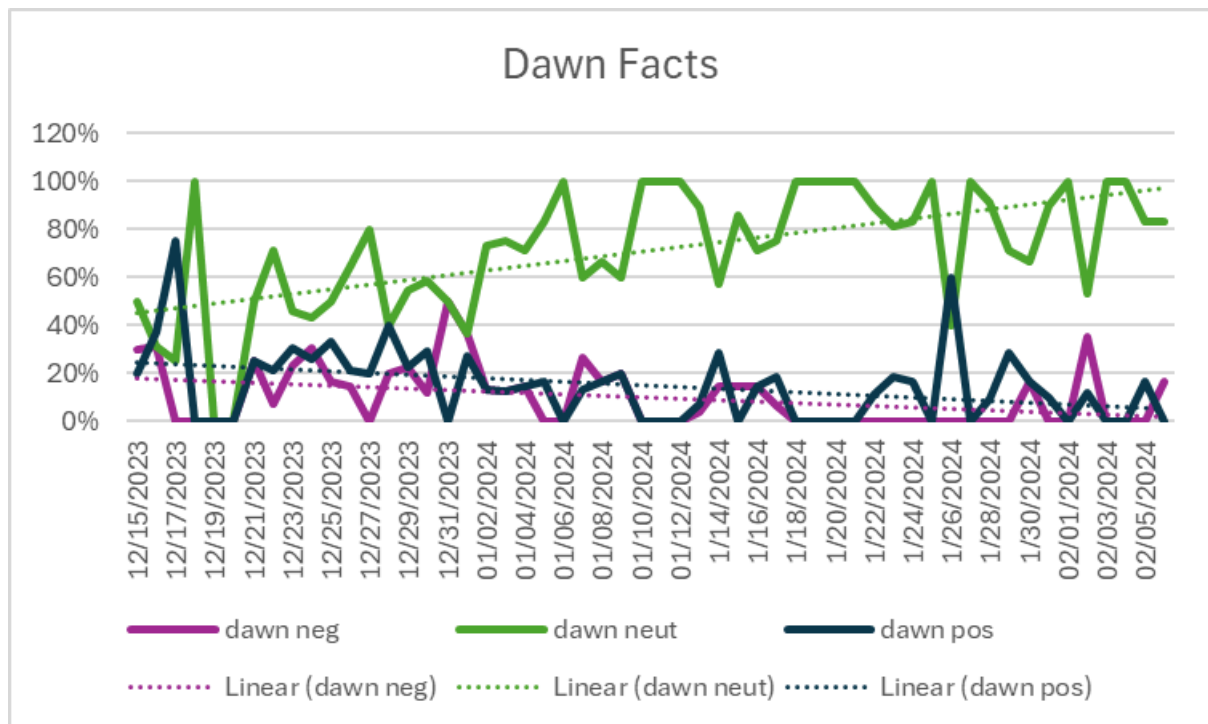
		Newspaper		
		Dawn	the news	Total
F1tri positive	Count	7	8	15
	% within F1tri	46.7%	53.3%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	7.9%	7.8%	7.9%
neutral	Count	76	83	159
	% within F1tri	47.8%	52.2%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	85.4%	81.4%	83.2%
negative	Count	6	11	17
	% within F1tri	35.3%	64.7%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	6.7%	10.8%	8.9%
Total	Count	89	102	191
	% within F1tri	46.6%	53.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Across Time

Facts - Dawn

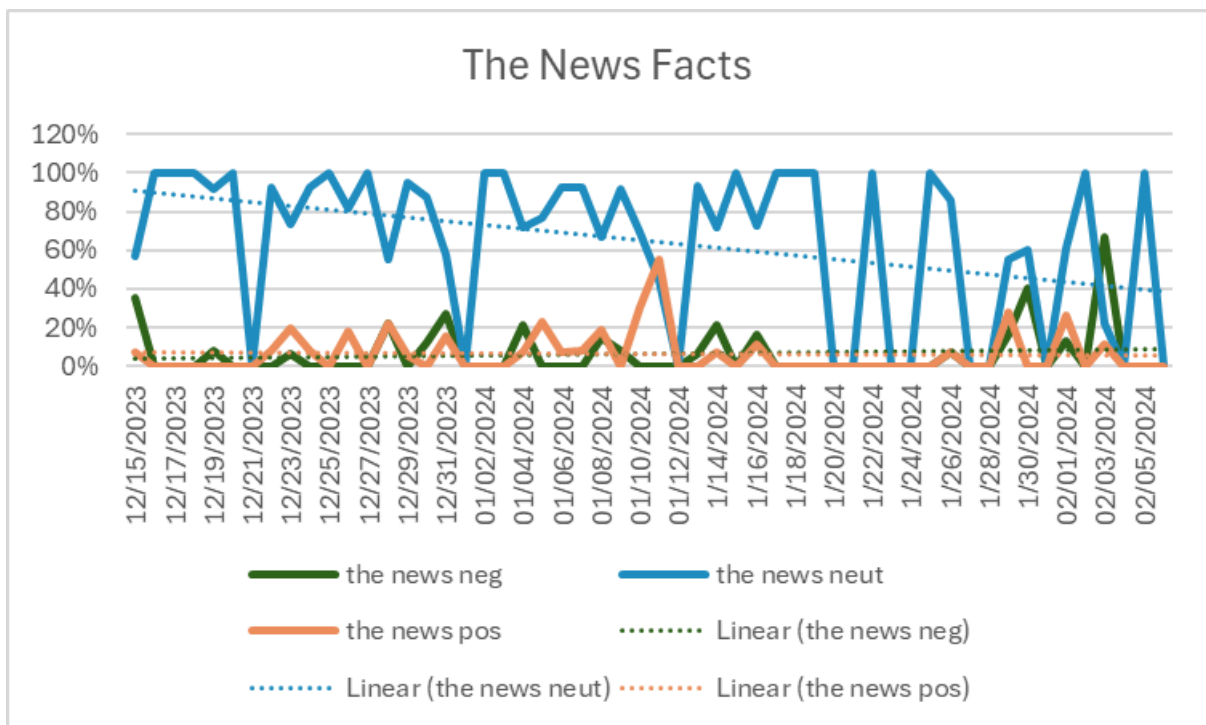
Dawn's neutral facts showed an upward trend and remained higher than both negative and positive facts throughout the time period. The best fit line of neutral facts also indicates an upward trend. Positive facts were consistently higher than negative facts, though the best fit line of positive facts shows a downward trend. Negative facts remained low and consistent, with the best fit line showing a slight downward trend.



Facts – The News

In *The News*, neutral facts remained higher than both negative and positive facts throughout the time period. After late January, neutral facts began to decrease while negative facts started to increase. The best fit line of neutral facts shows a downward trend. Positive

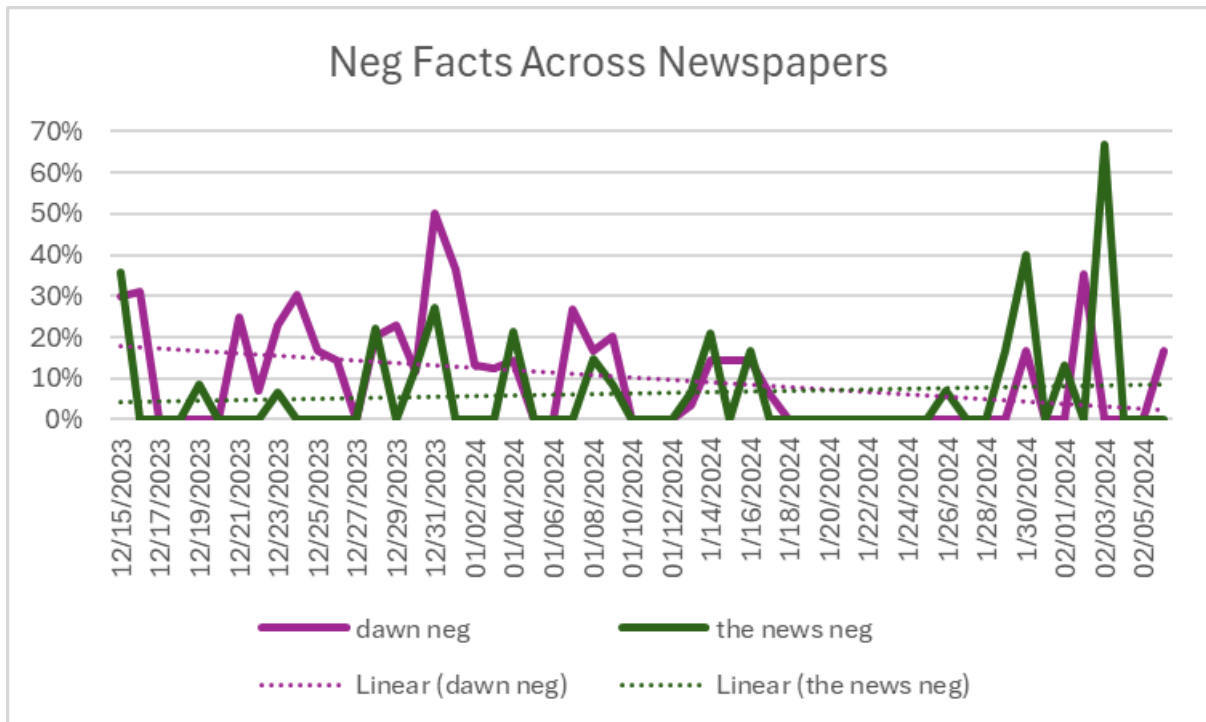
and negative facts remained relatively consistent throughout, with a slight increase in positive facts in early January. There was an increase in negative facts in February, accompanied by a smaller increase in positive facts. The best fit lines of both positive and negative facts show no significant change.



Across Newspaper

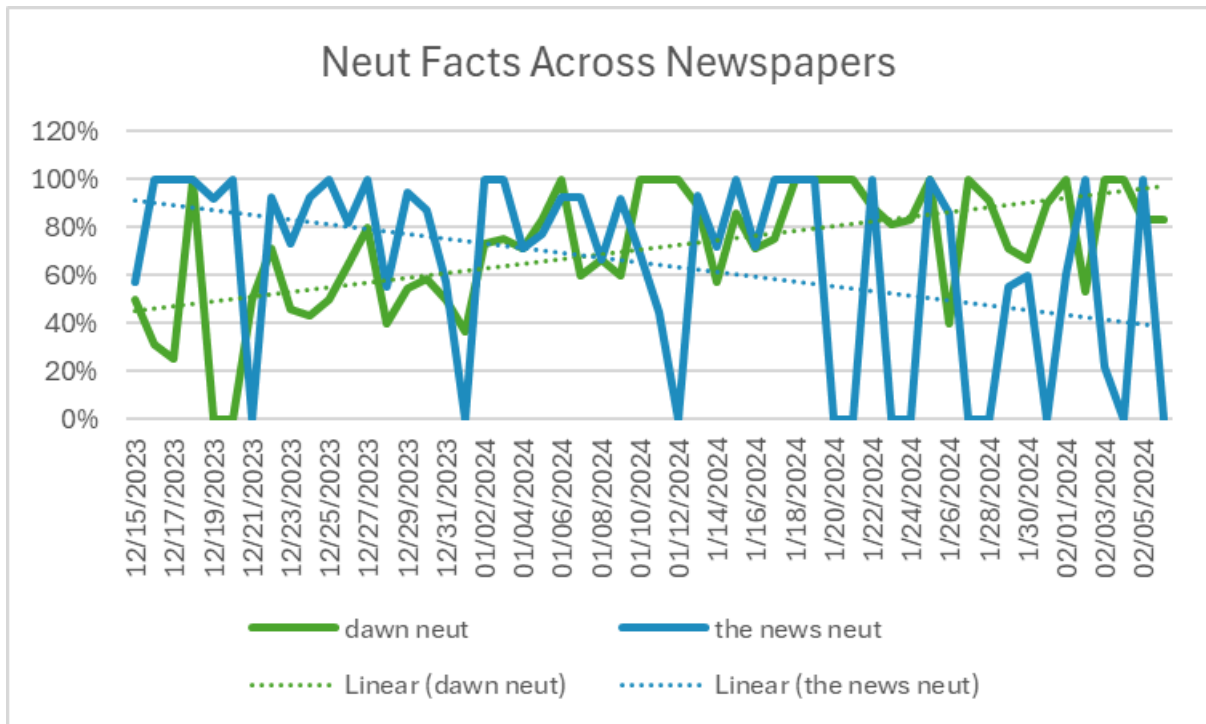
Facts – Negative

Dawn initially presented more negatively portrayed facts, but this decreased after late December. In contrast, *The News* maintained a consistent low level of negatively portrayed facts, which then increased in February. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows a downward trend, while the best fit line for *The News* shows an upward trend.



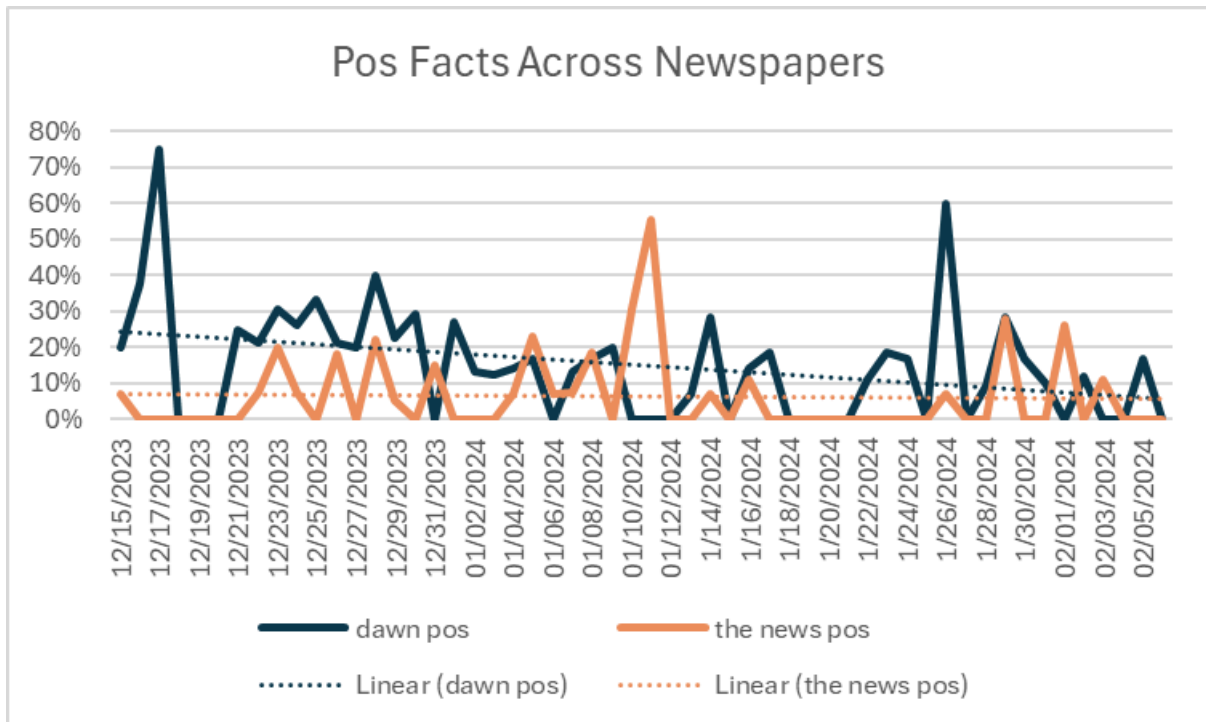
Facts - Neutral

Dawn's neutral facts increased steadily throughout the time period, with the best fit line showing an upward trend. In contrast, *The News* had a relatively high level of neutral facts in the beginning, but these began to decrease in late January, with the best fit line showing a downward trend.



Facts - Positive

Across both newspapers, *Dawn* initially had more positive facts than *The News* in December, but this decreased to the same level as *The News* in early January. *Dawn* then saw an increase in positive facts in late January before declining again toward the end of the period. In contrast, *The News* maintained a low and consistent level of positive facts, with only a slight increase in early January. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows a downward trend, while there was no significant change for *The News*.



Key Findings of H1c

The analysis of facts presented by both *Dawn* and *The News* reveals a predominantly neutral stance regarding PTI's legitimacy and identity, with *Dawn* presenting 70.6% out of 527 facts, and *The News* presenting 79.1% out of 556 facts, as neutral.

While both newspapers maintained an overall neutral tone, 10.8% of *The News*' 102 stories used predominantly negative facts, compared to 6.7% of *Dawn*'s 89 stories. Both had low levels of stories with predominantly positive facts—7.9% for *Dawn* and 7.8% for *The News*.

Over time, *Dawn*'s neutral facts showed a steady upward trend, while *The News* showed a decline. Additionally, *The News* experienced a slight rise in negative facts, particularly in February. The presentation of facts in both newspapers primarily set a neutral tone, but displayed notable differences in the representation of negative facts.

Labels

- H1d: Labels were predominantly used to challenge PTI and its identity, aligning with the hegemonic perspective

Aggregate count - Dawn

During the time period, labels used by *Dawn* to depict and discuss PTI's legitimacy and identity were predominantly neutral, with 52% of the 306 labels classified as neutral. Negative labels accounted for 19.3%, while positive labels accounted for 28.8% of the total. Overall, *Dawn* maintained a neutral tone in the use of labels.

Dawn theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			Total	
		positive	neutral	negative		
theme	language	Count	88 _a	159 _a	59 _a	306
		% within theme	28.8%	52.0%	19.3%	100.0%

Aggregate count - The News

During the time period, labels used by *The News* to depict and discuss PTI's legitimacy and identity were predominantly neutral, with 46.5% of the 331 labels classified as neutral. Negative labels accounted for 29.3%, while positive labels accounted for 24.2% of the total. Overall, *The News* maintained a neutral tone in the use of labels.

The News theme * variable Crosstabulation

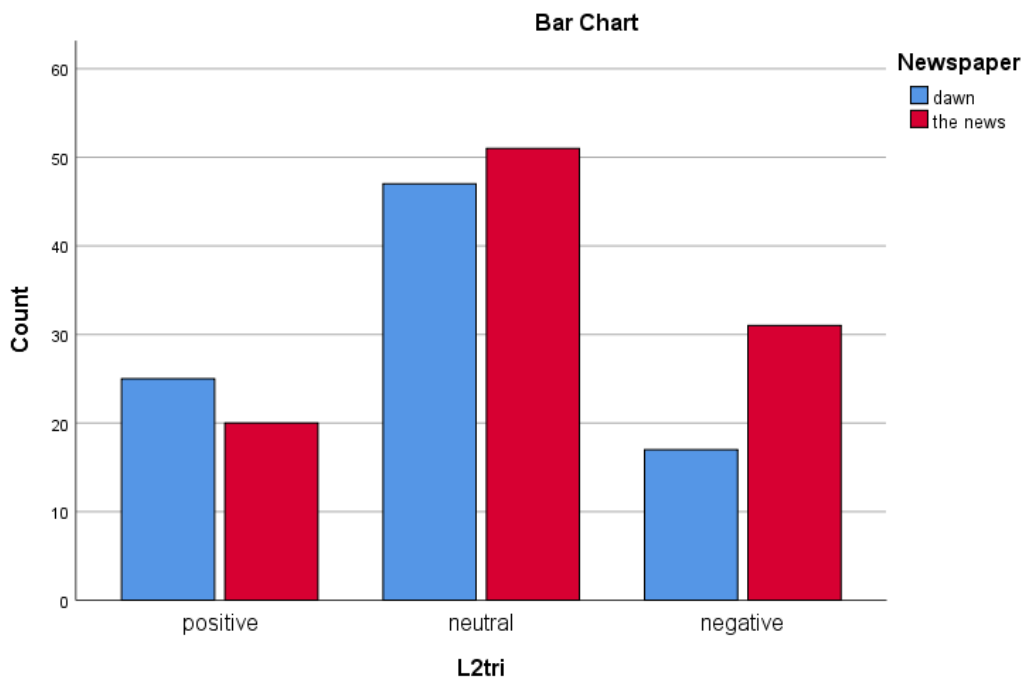
theme	language	Count	variable			Total
			positive	neutral	negative	
		80 _a	154 _b	97 _a	331	
		% within theme	24.2%	46.5%	29.3%	100.0%

Across Newspapers

Across both newspapers, the overall usage of labels was predominantly neutral, with 52.8% of *Dawn's* stories being predominantly classified as neutral and 50% in *The News*. However, *Dawn* had a higher percentage of stories with predominantly positive labels at 28.1%, compared to 19.6% in *The News*. Conversely, *The News* had a higher percentage of stories with predominantly negative labels at 30.4%, while *Dawn* had 19.1%.

L2tri * Newspaper Crosstabulation

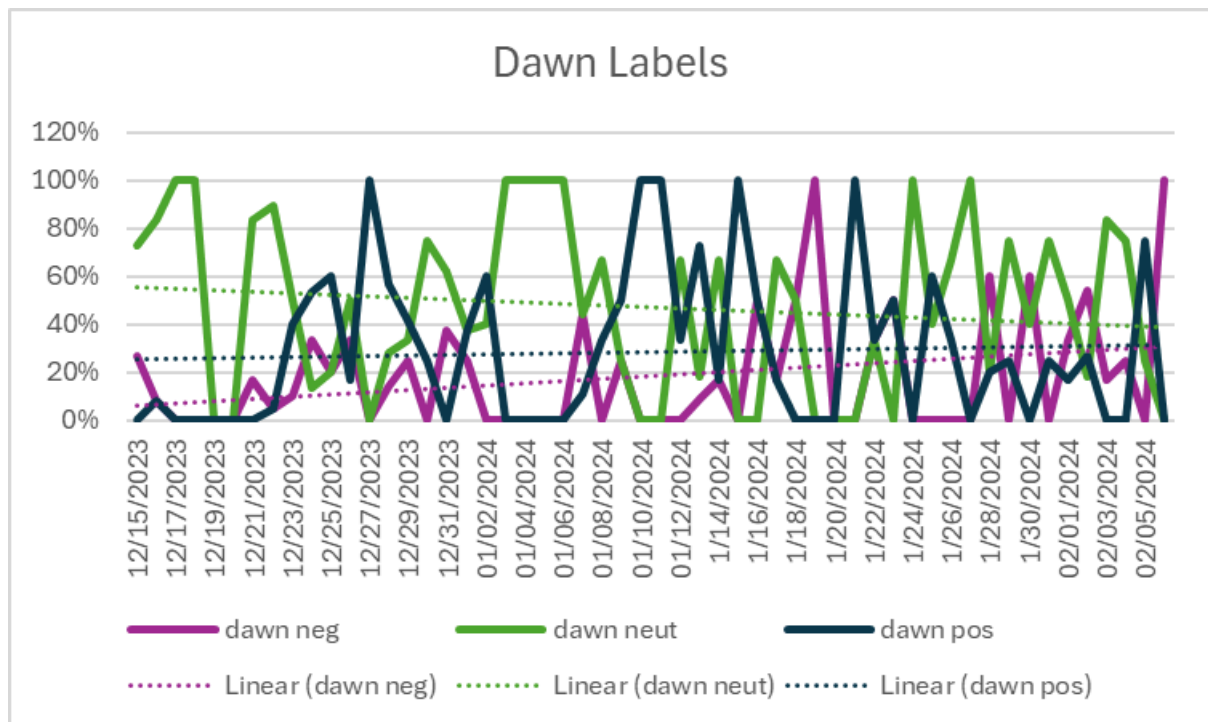
		Newspaper		Total
		Dawn	the news	
L2tri positive	Count	25	20	45
	% within L2tri	55.6%	44.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	28.1%	19.6%	23.6%
neutral	Count	47	51	98
	% within L2tri	48.0%	52.0%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	52.8%	50.0%	51.3%
negative	Count	17	31	48
	% within L2tri	35.4%	64.6%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	19.1%	30.4%	25.1%
Total	Count	89	102	191
	% within L2tri	46.6%	53.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Across Time

Labels - Dawn

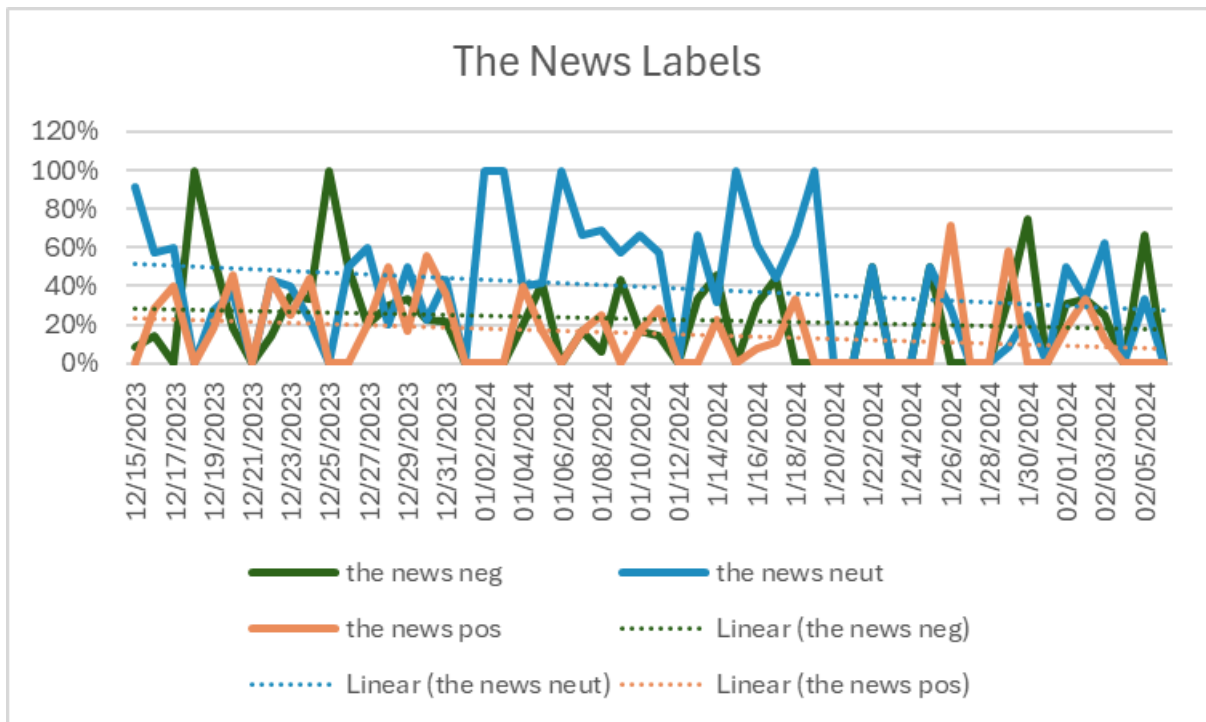
Dawn's negative labels remained the lowest and consistent until mid-January, when they increased before decreasing again until the end of the period. The best fit line for negative labels shows a slight upward trend. Neutral labels in *Dawn* remained the highest and consistent, with a slight decrease in mid-January, coinciding with an increase in the usage of positive labels. The best fit line for positive labels shows an upward trend, while the best fit line for neutral labels indicates a downward trend.



Labels – The News

In December, *The News* had low levels of neutral and positive labels while using a higher number of negative labels. In January, the usage of neutral labels increased, coinciding

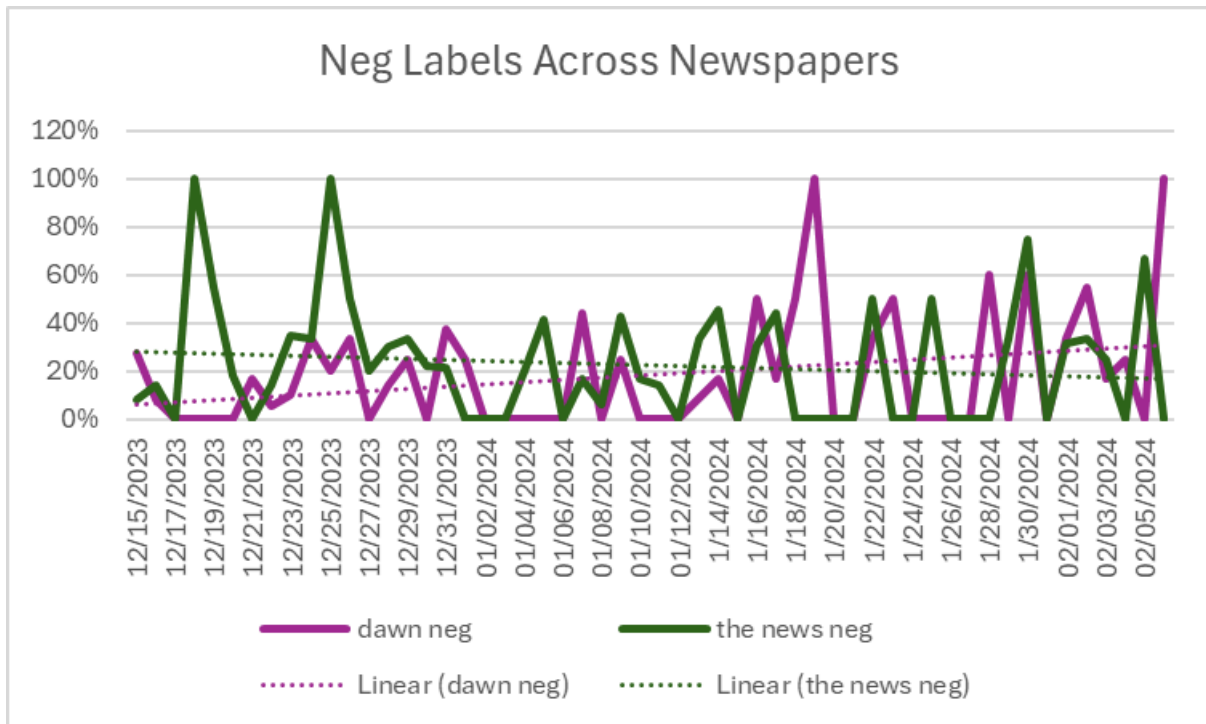
with a decrease in negative labels, while positive labels remained at the same level. However, from late January onward, the usage of neutral labels decreased, and all three types of labels—negative, positive, and neutral—were used at relatively the same level.



Across Time and Newspapers

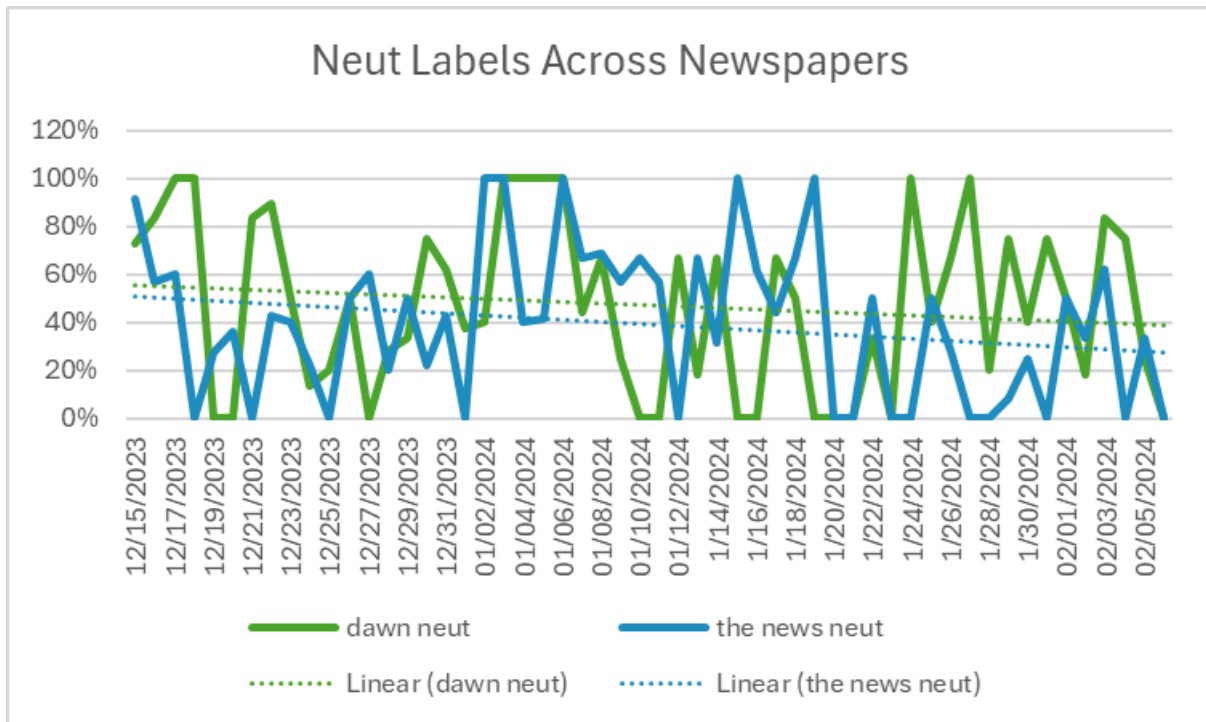
Labels - Negative

The News used a higher number of negative labels in December, followed by a decrease that led to relatively consistent usage afterwards. In contrast, *Dawn* had significantly fewer negative labels overall, maintaining low and consistent usage until mid-January, when it experienced a slight increase. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows an upward trend, while the best fit line for *The News* shows a downward trend.



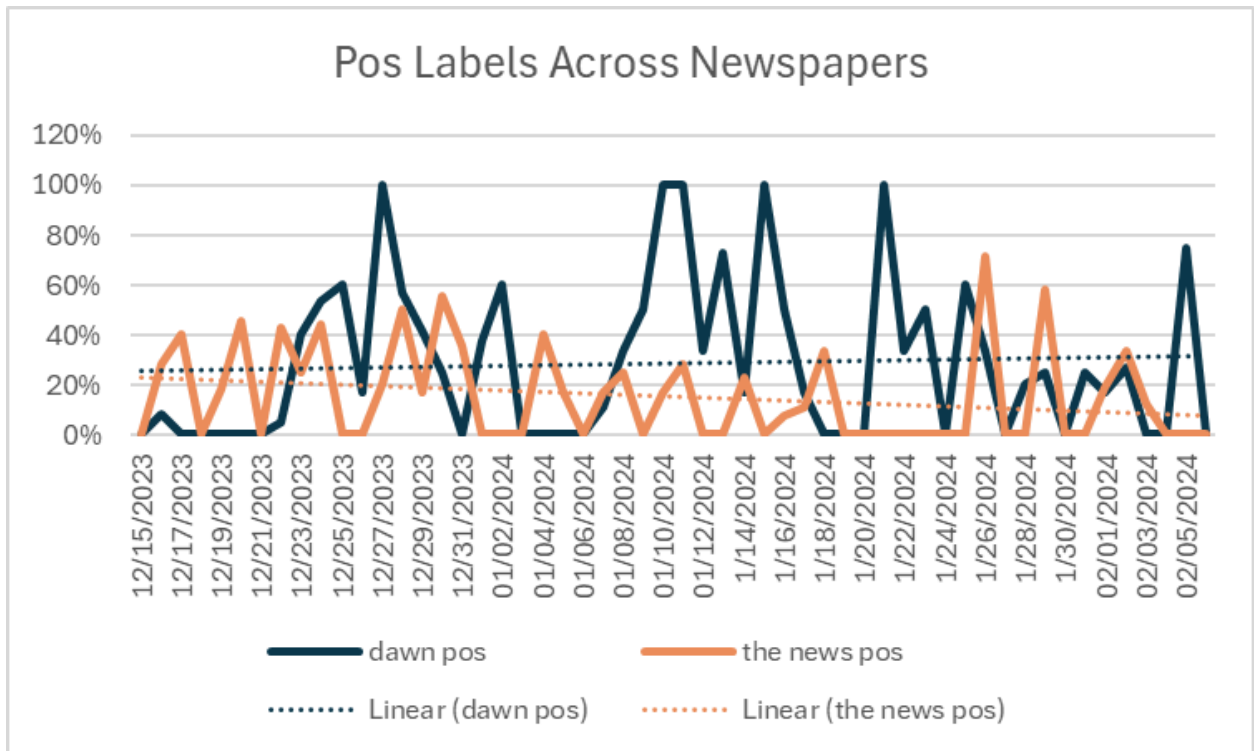
Labels - Neutral

Dawn used more neutral labels in December compared to *The News*. However, *Dawn*'s use of neutral labels decreased in early January before increasing again in late January. *The News* had fewer neutral labels in December, which increased in early January but then decreased in late January, remaining low and consistent afterwards. Both best fit lines for *Dawn* and *The News* show a downward trend.



Labels - Positive

The News maintained a low and consistent usage of positive labels, with a decrease in January, followed by an increase in February. The best fit line for *The News* shows an overall downward trend. In contrast, *Dawn's* usage of positive labels was overall higher than that of *The News*. *Dawn* experienced an increase in positive label usage in late December, which then decreased in early January before increasing again and remaining consistent. This was followed by a decrease in late January and another increase in February. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows an overall upward trend.



Key Findings for H1d

Majority of the labels used in both newspapers with reference to PTI's legitimacy and identity were of a neutral nature. Out of the 306 labels counted in *Dawn* and 331 labels counted in *The News*, 52% and 46.5% were neutral, respectively. *Dawn* had a higher proportion of positively labeled stories (28.1%) compared to *The News* (19.6%), whereas *The News* featured more negatively labeled stories (30.4%) than *Dawn* (19.1%).

Both newspapers had a downward trend in use of neutral labels over time. *Dawn's* best fit lines for both negative and positive labels show an upward trend, while the opposite is true for *The News*. Overall, while both newspapers predominantly used neutral labels, *Dawn* used more positive labeling relative to *The News*, which relied more on negative labels.

Narratives

- H1e: Media narratives predominantly favor the hegemonic framing of PTI's legitimacy and identity

Aggregate count – Dawn

During the time period, *Dawn* presented a total of 174 narratives, with 36.2% classified as neutral, 20.1% as negative, and 43.7% as positive. Overall, the narratives used by *Dawn* were predominantly positively biased towards PTI.

Dawn theme * variable Crosstabulation

		variable			
		positive	neutral	negative	Total
theme	language Count	76 _a	63 _b	35 _a	174
	% within theme	43.7%	36.2%	20.1%	100.0%

Aggregate count – The News

During the time period, *The News* presented a total of 155 narratives, with 48.4% classified as neutral, 31% as negative, and 20.6% as positive. Overall, the narratives used by *The News* were predominantly neutral.

The News theme * variable Crosstabulation

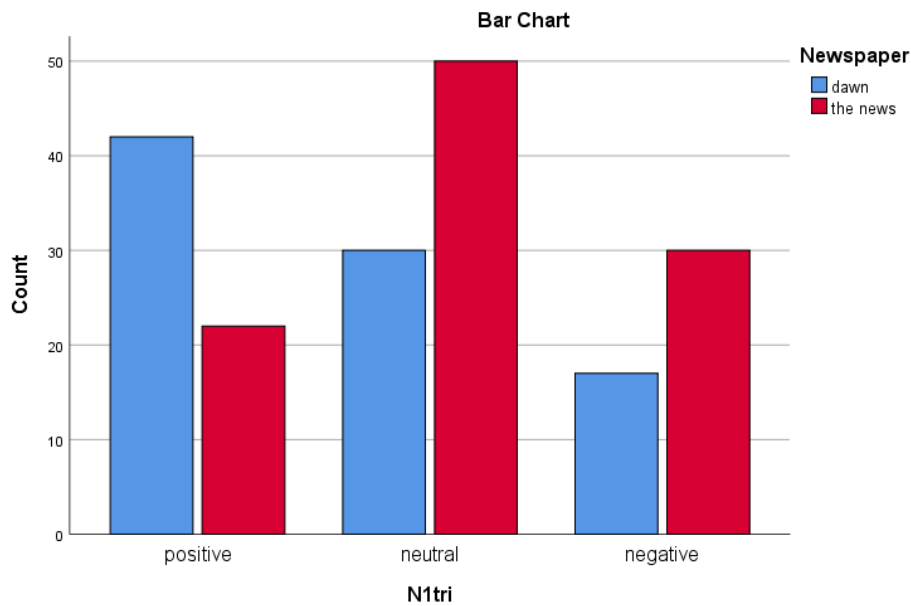
		variable			
		positive	neutral	negative	Total
theme	language Count	32 _a	75 _a	48 _b	155
	% within theme	20.6%	48.4%	31.0%	100.0%

Across Newspaper

Across the two newspapers, *Dawn* featured a higher proportion of positive narratives in their stories, with 47.2%, compared to *The News*, which had only 21.6%. *Dawn* used nearly double the amount of positive narratives. In contrast, *The News* had a greater proportion of stories with predominantly neutral narratives at 49%, while *Dawn* had 33.7%. Additionally, *The News* also presented more stories with predominantly negative narratives at 29.4% compared to *Dawn's* 19.1%.

N1tri * Newspaper Crosstabulation

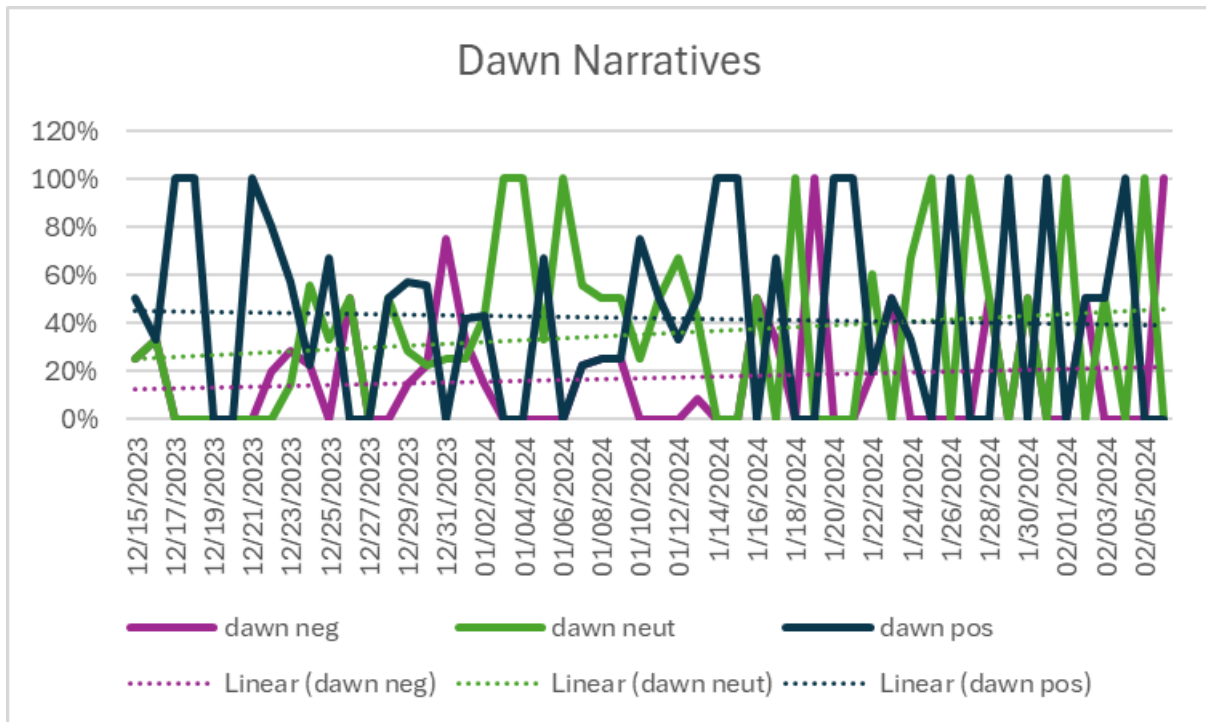
		Newspaper		
		Dawn	the news	Total
N1tri positive	Count	42	22	64
	% within N1tri	65.6%	34.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	47.2%	21.6%	33.5%
neutral	Count	30	50	80
	% within N1tri	37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	33.7%	49.0%	41.9%
negative	Count	17	30	47
	% within N1tri	36.2%	63.8%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	19.1%	29.4%	24.6%
Total	Count	89	102	191
	% within N1tri	46.6%	53.4%	100.0%
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Across Time

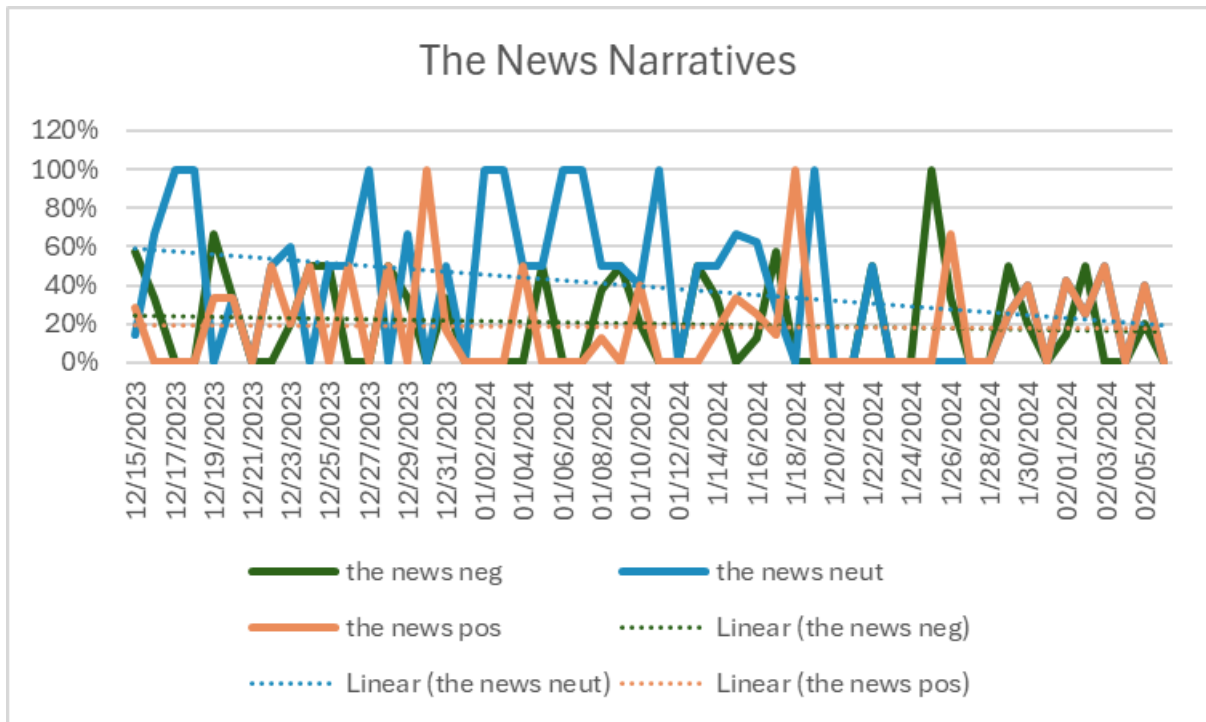
Narratives - Dawn

In *Dawn*, the usage of negative narratives remained the lowest overall throughout the observed period. Positive narratives peaked in mid-December, then decreased before rising again in early January, where they remained relatively high afterwards. Neutral narratives initially started low but increased significantly, maintaining a high level afterwards. Notably, in late January and early February, both positive and neutral narratives were elevated but occurred on alternating days. Although *Dawn*'s negative narratives saw a slight increase in mid-January and early February, they still remained the lowest overall. The best fit line for negative narratives shows a slight upward trend, while the best fit line for neutral narratives shows an upward trend. The best fit line for positive narratives shows a slight downward trend.



Narratives - The News

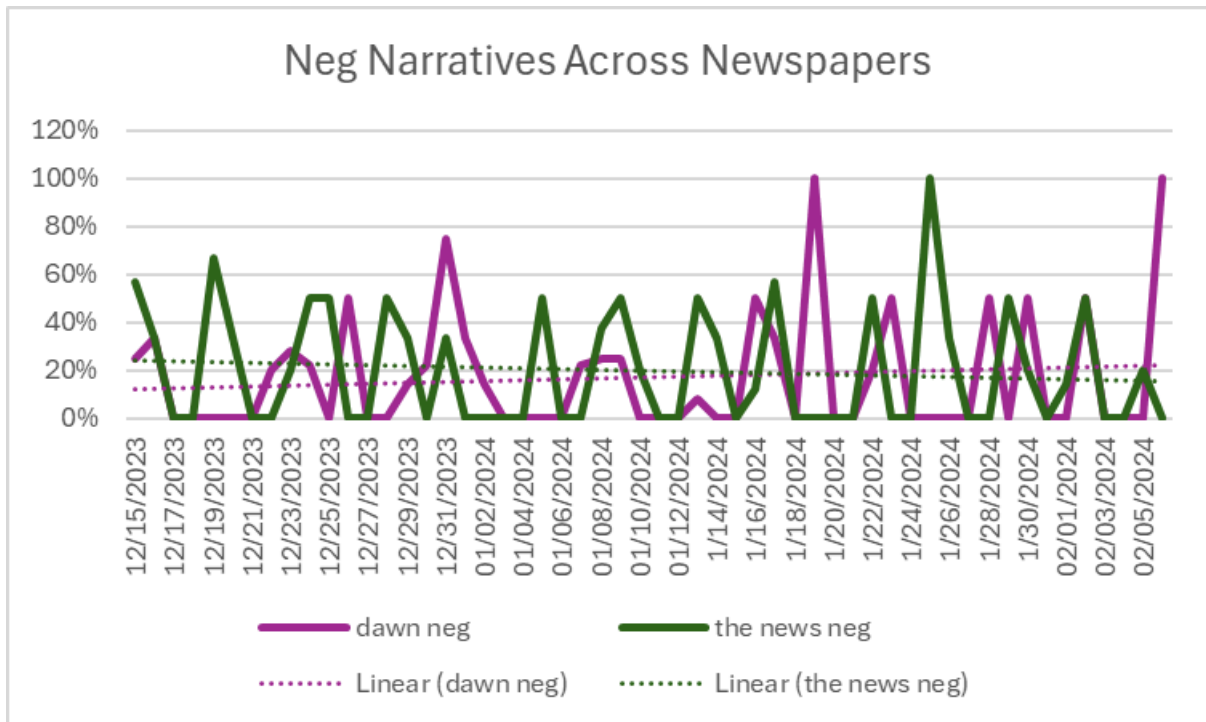
In *The News*, neutral narratives remained the highest until mid-January, after which they began to decrease, coinciding with an increase in negative narratives. Over time, negative and positive narratives remained relatively low and consistent. The best fit line for neutral narratives indicates a downward trend, while the best fit lines for both negative and positive narratives show no significant change.



Across Time and Newspapers

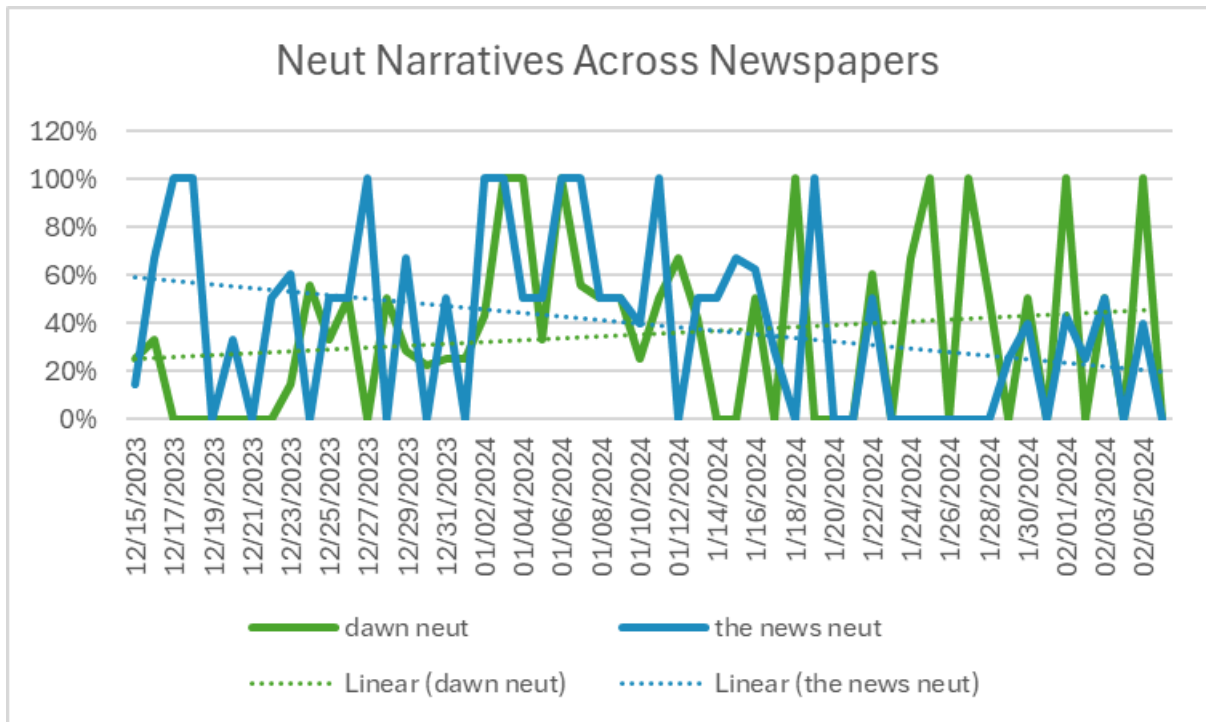
Narratives - Negative

The News maintained a consistent usage of negative narratives, with a notable increase in late January before returning to previous levels. *The News* had a higher number of negative narratives in December. In contrast, *Dawn* had lower negative narratives in December, which increased in late December before decreasing. This pattern repeated with increase in late January, followed by another decrease. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows a slight upward trend, while the best fit line for *The News* shows a slight downward trend.



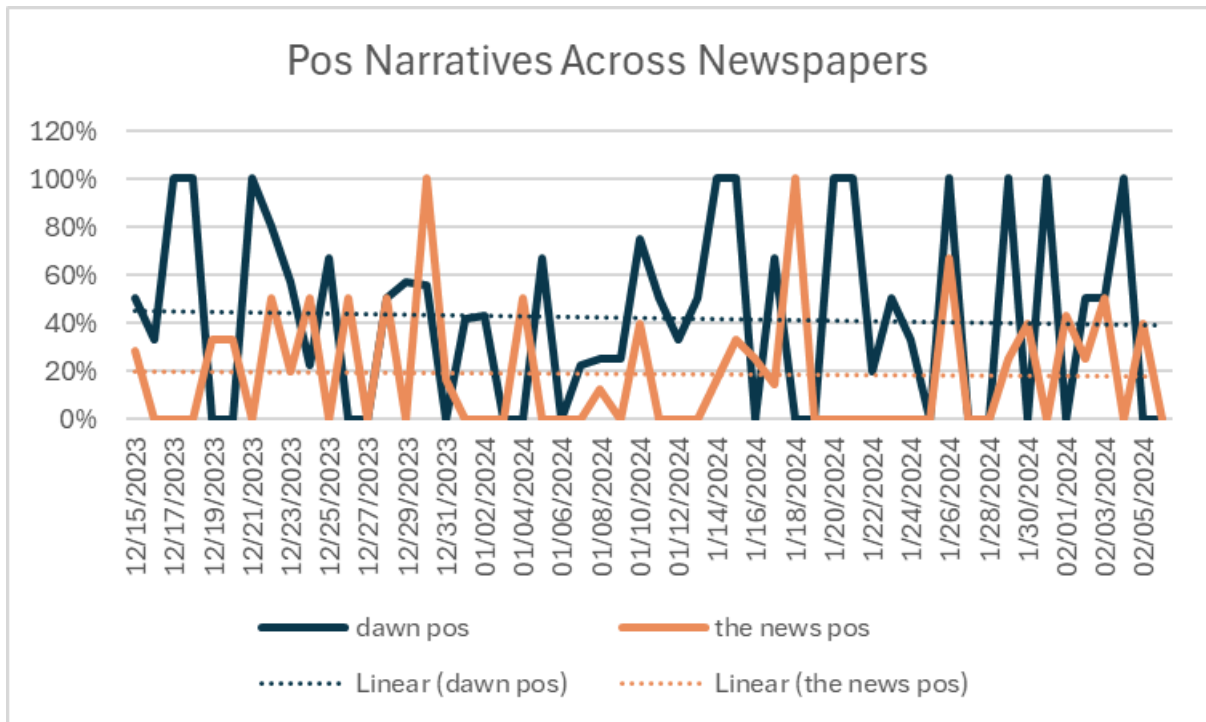
Narratives - Neutral

The News had a higher number of neutral narratives in December. In early January, both *Dawn* and *The News* displayed equal and high levels of neutral narratives. However, the usage of neutral narratives by *The News* decreased in late January. *Dawn* started with low neutral narratives but saw an increase, maintaining high and consistent levels afterwards. The best fit line for *Dawn* shows an upward trend, while the best fit line for *The News* shows a downward trend.



Narratives - Positive

Dawn had a higher overall count of positive narratives than *The News*. *Dawn* had more positive narratives in mid-December, followed by a decrease in late December. However, it increased again in mid-January and maintained high and consistent levels afterwards. In contrast, *The News* had low and consistent positive narratives over time, with only slight increases in late December and mid-January. The best fit line for *The News* shows no significant change, while *Dawn*'s best fit line shows a slight downward trend.



Key Findings of H1e

The narratives regarding PTI's legitimacy and identity from *Dawn* and *The News* have differing results. *Dawn* presented 174 narratives in total, with 43.7% classified as positive, 36.2% as neutral, and 20.1% as negative, suggesting a predominantly positive bias. Conversely, *The News* had 155 narratives in total, with 48.4% neutral, 31% negative, and 20.6% positive, suggesting an overall neutral stance.

A smaller proportion of *Dawn's* stories contained predominantly negative narratives (19.1%) compared to *The News* (29.4%). *Dawn* had more than double the number of stories with positive narrative (47.2%) compared to *The News* (21.6%), while *The News* featured more stories with neutral narratives (49%) than *Dawn* (33.7%).

Dawn's neutral narratives showed an overall increase over time, with both neutral and positive narratives alternating at high levels in late January and early February. *The News* however, had more negative narratives, particularly in December and late January, while neutral narratives were higher till mid-January before declining. Overall, news stories in *Dawn* contained significantly more positive narratives, while *The News* had a greater number of negative and neutral narratives, with little change observed in the use of positive narratives.

Overall Summary of Key Findings

The overall findings show similar patterns in how *Dawn* and *The News* depicted PTI's legitimacy and identity across the themes, with some points of distinction. Both *Dawn* and *The News* used more neutral language, facts and labels. Both newspapers also used more positive sources. However, *Dawn* used more positive narratives while *The News* used more neutral narratives.

While both *Dawn* and *The News* predominantly used neutral language, *Dawn* had a higher share of positive language relative to *The News*, which used more negative language. In terms of sources, both newspapers cited mostly positive sources. Comparatively, the percentage of stories using neutral or negative sources was higher in *The News*, while a greater percentage of stories in *Dawn* had positive sources. Facts in both newspapers were largely neutral, but *The News* had a slightly higher proportion of negative facts. *Dawn* used more positive labels relative to *The News*, while *The News* used more negative labels. Regarding narratives, *Dawn* showed a predominantly positive bias, contrasting with *The News's* more neutral stance. *Dawn's* positive narratives surged in January and February, while

The News had a higher number of negative and neutral narratives throughout the period. These findings indicate that while reporting was largely neutral, *Dawn* was more favorable toward PTI, while *The News* adopted a more balanced, sometimes critical, approach.

Dawn showed a gradual increase in neutral language usage over time, while *The News* experienced a decline in neutral language towards the end of January. Positive language peaked in mid-December for *Dawn* before fluctuating, whereas *The News* maintained a more balanced but consistently low level of positive language.

Dawn showed an upward trend in citing positive sources. In contrast, *The News* saw a decline in positive source citations, maintaining a steady use of neutral sources while incorporating more negative sources over time.

Dawn's use of neutral facts steadily increased over time. *The News* showed a decline in neutral facts, with a slight rise in negative facts, particularly in February. Both newspapers maintained low levels of positive facts over time.

Both newspapers showed a downward trend in neutral label usage. *Dawn* showed an upward trend in positive labels over time. *The News*, on the other hand, relied more on negative labels, especially in later months.

Dawn's positive narratives peaked in mid-January and maintained high levels afterwards, with an overall increase in neutral narratives nearer the end of the observation period. *The News*, however, had a consistent level of negative narratives, with neutral narratives peaking in mid-January before declining.

Overall, the findings suggest that while both newspapers had largely neutral reporting, *Dawn* leaned more toward positive portrayals and *The News* adopted a more critical perspective during specific time periods.

Discussion

This study explored the extent to which the English print media aligned with hegemonic views versus fulfilling a watchdog role in portraying PTI's legitimacy and identity leading up to the 2024 Pakistan General Elections—a tense time for PTI and its leader, Imran Khan, amidst significant legal challenges. As Giles (2001) argues, “the watchdog role of the press is never more vital than during a national crisis.” To explore this, variables in the data were analyzed to test five hypotheses. The findings indicate that English print media adopted a nuanced approach, showing that they carried out their watchdog responsibilities to varying degrees. Coding of the quadrant usage showed that both newspapers primarily placed their stories in the first and second quadrants of the front page, meaning most of the stories were positioned ‘above the fold’—the upper portion of the front page that is visible without having to unfold the newspaper. This placement indicates that these stories were given more visibility and emphasis.

Contrary to expectations, language, facts, and labels (H1a, H1c, H1d) remained largely neutral in both newspapers. Language, initially expected to be critical of PTI, was mostly neutral, providing objective descriptions of PTI's actions without any significant judgment or emotional tone. Similarly, facts were presented without notable bias, and labels were factual or broadly accepted descriptors, avoiding judgmental connotations. These findings show that newspapers adopted a more balanced approach and were not influenced by the purported hegemonic viewpoint.

In contrast, H1b and H1e, which hypothesized that media sources and constructed narratives would predominantly align with the hegemonic perspective, had differing results. Both *Dawn* and *The News* included a greater proportion of positive sources, suggesting a somewhat favorable portrayal of PTI. In terms of narratives, *Dawn* leaned towards a more

positive framing, while *The News* remained largely neutral. Together, these results highlight that *Dawn* presented three themes neutrally and two positively, while *The News* presented one theme positively and four themes neutrally. Overall, both newspapers deviated from the expected hegemonic alignment with their neutral or positive portrayals of PTI. Findings indicate that the English print media actively took on the watchdog role in their portrayal of the PTI's legitimacy and identity.

Time series analysis reveals distinct trends in the newspapers' coverage leading up to the February 8 elections. *Dawn's* positive language peaked in mid-December, and fluctuated before moderating its tone closer to election day, potentially to avoid projecting explicit partisanship. Its steady rise in positive source citations and high levels of positive narratives in January show a tendency to support PTI's image as elections neared. In contrast, *The News* adopted a more critical stance, with a decline in neutral language and a rise in negative language and sources from late January onward. This critical framing, combined with an increase in negative labels and narratives, suggest *The News* evaluated PTI more critically as the election drew closer. These patterns highlight each newspaper's distinct approach.

Aligning with agenda-setting theory's second level, the coverage included both substantive and affective dimensions. Here, the substantive dimension centers on PTI's legitimacy and identity, while the affective dimension addresses the emotional tone, which was largely neutral or positive. This neutral and occasionally positive portrayal can allow audiences to form independent interpretations of PTI's legitimacy and identity, free from strong emotional influence.

These findings partially align with prior research on *Dawn* and *The News* (Chaudhry & Ashraf, 2012; Jan et al., 2013), which found the former generally neutral, and the latter more in-line with the state's perspective. In contrast, this study found both *Dawn* and *The*

News to be predominantly neutral or positive in their portrayal of PTI. However, *The News* adopted a relatively more negative tone than *Dawn*, aligning somewhat with the hegemonic perspective. Additionally, Jan et al. (2013) also noted that *The News* was more engaged in country politics than *Dawn*, which is consistent with this study as *The News* published significantly more stories within the analyzed period.

This study's findings can also be understood through the lens of proactive agenda-setting, one of the four visions McCombs (1997) identifies. Rooted in journalism's public service ethic, this vision encourages the media to move beyond professional detachment. As McCombs writes,

“Few, if any, of the advocates of proactive agenda-setting want to be the agenda setters, making decisions about all the issues that make it to the community agenda. They are quite satisfied to let routine and traditional patterns of behavior move most issues onto the community agenda. But these journalists believe that it is the duty and responsibility of the news media to ensure through proactive reporting when necessary that the key issues, situations, and opportunities do come to community attention. This emerging professional perspective is called public journalism (Merritt, 1995).”

The concept of public journalism states that journalism and democracy are intrinsically linked, if not mutually dependent (Rosen, 1995). Public journalism advocates (eg. Charity, 1995; Rosen, 1995; Merritt, 1998) argue that journalism should go beyond merely informing citizens; it should also actively engage them in democratic processes. As Rosen (1998, as cited in Haas, 2007) emphasizes, journalists should “help form as well as inform the public,” an approach that encourages media to stimulate public involvement and critical thinking. According to Müller (2014), media in a democracy serves both vertical and

horizontal functions: disseminating information about politics and politicians to citizens, and providing a public forum that reflects society's diverse interests. This study's findings suggest the newspapers performed both functions, as they balanced objective descriptions with the presentation of alternative perspectives, allowing readers to make independent evaluations and interpretations.

Both *Dawn* and *The News* exhibited a proactive yet balanced role, presenting the public with factual information alongside alternate interpretations that encourage independent judgment on PTI's legitimacy and identity. *Dawn* and *The News* fulfilled their democratic duty, not by advocating specific outcomes, but by creating an informed space for public engagement. This stance shows journalism's dual role as both a vehicle for communication and a platform that supports community interest through well-rounded coverage, which can allow citizens to critically engage and participate through forming informed, independent judgments on political issues.

Public journalism is also watchful of partisanship. Public journalism's "golden rule," as Charity (1995, as cited in Glasser & Craft, 2002) describes, is to advocate for democratic means without endorsing particular solutions. This "neutrality on specifics" (Merritt, 1995, as cited in Glasser & Craft, 2002), which is seen through this study's findings, allows journalism to support open conversation without diving into partisan advocacy, promoting democratic participation without bias (Glasser & Craft, 2002). Nonetheless, this approach can experience challenges, as public journalism's optimistic view of the electorate assumes a common dialogue within a unified public sphere, a concept that Fraser (1992, as cited in Glasser & Craft, 2002) critiques as overly simplistic within stratified societies. In such contexts, media that aim to serve as a forum for "common values and shared interests" must also recognize structural inequalities that shape public discourse (Glasser & Craft, 2002).

These complexities resonate with this study's findings. Both *Dawn* and *The News* largely adopted a stance that avoids partisanship while providing readers with a platform for informed, independent judgment about PTI's legitimacy and identity. In doing so, the findings reiterate Weideman's (2009) claim that "newspapers indeed are still capable of performing their watchdog role, especially during an election."

Limitations

Content analysis has several methodological limitations. The coding process involves subjective interpretation, particularly in assessing biases, which introduces potential for inconsistencies and researcher bias. Because content analysis is context-sensitive, it requires the researcher to be highly interpretative when dealing with data, which can limit the researcher's ability to generalize findings. Furthermore, content analysis is inherently reductionist and may oversimplify complex narratives by relying on keyword frequency or word count. Because of this, it's often difficult to answer the 'why' behind media portrayals, and how they are received by audiences, limiting the range of insights.

Other limitations of this study stem from both the design and scope of the content analysis. First, the coding scheme was developed individually, which can introduce potential biases in categorization. Using multiple raters and validating the coding scheme would likely have increased reliability and objectivity. Additionally, the analysis covered a limited timeframe; expanding the time period to include pre- and post-election months could provide more insights. The study's sample was also restricted to only two English newspapers due to time constraint; including more newspapers, especially Urdu ones, would provide a broader and potentially more representative perspective. Lastly, the focus on front-page stories

excluded relevant content from other sections; expanding the analysis beyond the front page could reveal more subtle biases or patterns.

Implications

The findings of this study highlight a nuanced portrayal of PTI by *Dawn* and *The News*, reinforcing the essential role of media in a democracy. By balancing neutral and positive portrayals of PTI's legitimacy and identity, both newspapers encouraged independent public judgment, underscoring journalism's role as a facilitator of public debate. This commitment to objectivity supports the media's watchdog function, which, as Giles (2001) notes, is most vital in times of national crises.

Objective reporting provides citizens with factual, unbiased information, enabling informed decision-making essential to a healthy democracy. McCombs' (1997) agenda-setting theory reinforces this, as media informs and shapes public priorities by spotlighting specific issues and perspectives.

In a politically complex society like Pakistan, journalistic integrity is critical; citizens need reliable sources of information that uphold accountability. Objective media coverage offers a neutral platform for diverse viewpoints, so audiences can engage with multiple perspectives.

These findings underscore the evolving role of media in Pakistan, showing how newspapers can uphold democratic values by presenting objective information and encouraging critical thinking.

Recommendations

Future research could expand on this study by incorporating additional media sources, including Urdu newspapers, television channels, regional media outlets and social media platforms. Extending the analysis period to include pre- and post-election months would allow for a better understanding of how media coverage changes in response to political outcomes.

For policy, media organizations could strengthen internal guidelines for balanced and unbiased reporting, particularly in election coverage. This might include editorial standards that limit sensationalism and mandate the presentation of diverse perspectives of political bodies. Policymakers could advocate for the safeguarding of press freedom to prevent political influence over media content, allowing journalists to operate without fear of censorship or retaliation. Additionally, there should be media literacy programs to educate the public on recognizing and evaluating bias, so citizens can be well-informed to make independent decisions. These programs could be especially beneficial in schools, where young people can be taught critical thinking skills to analyze media content, so they can detect subtler forms of persuasion in political discourse. Many studies have shown the relative advantage of media literacy training on children's processing skills, and abilities to evaluate partisan content critically (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Yates, 2001b; Bhatia & Pathak-Shelat, 2017; Bulger & Davison, 2018). Through training, students "become aware of how media messages are created, [and] their ability to evaluate and analyze them increases" (Yates, 2001a).

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the extent to which media aligned with hegemonic views versus fulfilling a watchdog role in shaping the legitimacy and identity of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) during the 2024 General Elections. Though a critical stance on PTI was expected due to the plethora of legal difficulties faced by the party and its members, the results revealed a largely neutral or positive stance across both *Dawn* and *The News*. This shows that the print media did indeed play a watchdog role by providing neutral, or alternate viewpoints that didn't align with the hegemonic perspective.

Looking ahead, these insights can provide a foundation for exploring how balanced media portrayals impact public perceptions and democratic engagement. Understanding this effect could reveal the extent to which the media, by offering neutral or alternative perspectives, shapes citizen trust and participation in democratic processes.

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