

# An Analysis of the News International Karachi's Portrayal of AXACT Scam and Its TV Channel Bol

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## Abstract

*The present study brings into focus newspaper coverage of the scam related to Axact Software Company and its upcoming TV Channel Bol. This study explores how The News International Karachi newspaper portrays and frames the issue of Axact and BOL television network. This study also defined how newspapers give coverage without applying the ethical and moral values of news. This study also discusses new media groups and related rules of business set by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regularity Authority. The study finds that there is a tendency among large media groups in the country to discourage the arrival of new media houses in the country. There seems to exist an environment of animosity between various media houses that is further exacerbated in the absence of the rules of the business set or vaguely set by the PEMRA. The study also reflects on standards of ethical reporting, especially when it comes to coverage of issues related to the media industry itself. Fair reporting, the right to reply, balancing of views, known and quality sources, and the provision of truth seem to be alien values for such coverage. Anti-News is not only published but also proudly accepted and cherished by the editors. The coverage of the story has been discussed in light of framing theory.*

**Keywords:** *News Coverage, AXACT Scam, Fair Reporting, Ethical and Moral Values.*

## INTRODUCTION

Chief Executive Officer Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh launched Axact Software Company in 1997 in Pakistan. According to Axact Software Company's website, it provides education worldwide. Later this Software Company also launched a TV Channel in 2013. Axact's customer are based of 40 million in six continents, and 100 countries and 1,300 cities with 25,000 workers. Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan stated, later this Software Company also launched a TV Channel Bol in 2013.

The News International-Karachi was launched on February 11, 1991, by Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman, Jang Group, known as the largest print media group. The News International was their

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first English-language morning newspaper and was simultaneously published in Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi.

According to Axact Bol TV Channel's website, Bol is a complete media enterprise consisting of platforms that are important and relevant to our audience, including television (news, entertainment, and sports). "This is our mission, and everything we do reflects this only, and nothing else. We work to be the number one with more than 50% of the revenues and profits of every global media market."

Dr. Tauseef Ahmed Khan, a senior journalist and columnist, stated that Bol TV Channel had no license; therefore, the management purchased two small channels, Aks and Labaik, and their names were proposed to change. Jobs in the BOL TV Channel were immensely publicized through advertising on social media and print media, including Dawn and Jahan e Pakistan (Dawn, 2013).

Senior journalist Mazhar Abbas informed that Bol TV Channel management painted 20000<sup>+</sup> vehicles in Pakistan and labeled Bol TV for free for its advertisement.

Senior journalist Nazeer Lagari stated that a fake-degree scandal relating to Axact Software Company appeared on May 17, 2015, in an American newspaper, The New York Times. This news story was broken by American Journalist Declan Walsh, referring to it as "FAKE DEGREES, REAL CASH." He reported that Karachi-based Information Technology Company 'Axact' Software Company' runs massive diploma mills and sells bogus degrees worldwide. This scam was discussed immensely in Pakistani print and electronic media".

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar stated that strict action against this fraud would be taken. Within 24 hours, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) raided Axact offices located in DHA Karachi, Islamabad, and seized computers and other equipment. Later, the Chief Executive Officer of Axact and Bol, Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh, was arrested with his key employees (Khan, 2015).

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan announced, "the government of Pakistan had written a letter to the FBI asking for its assistance in investigating the allegations leveled by the NYT story."

The Federal Investigation Agency took fast action and arrested the Chief Executive Officer of Axact and Bol Shoaib Ahmed Shaikh, along with other prominent colleagues, and initially charged them with fraud and money laundering; later, the case was registered on public order by 420 and 468 and referred to as fraudulent (Dawn, 2015).

Dawn News reported, "According to FIA sources, the FIR (7/2015) was registered through Saeed Memon, the assistant director of FIA's corporate crime circle, on behalf of the state. The individuals named in the FIR were subsequently arrested and are in FIA remand until June 7."

The FIR was registered under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), and the accused have been booked under sections 420, 468, 471, 472, 473, 474, 477-A, 109, and 34. The FIR was registered under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), and the accused have been booked under sections 420, 468, 471, 472, 473, 474, 477-A, 109, and 34."Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh, the Chief Executive Officer of Axact Software Company and Bol media group, was released from prison on August 24, 2016, after spending sixteen months in custody and paying a fine of five lac Pakistani rupees (Dawn, 2016).

Before the New York Times newspaper exposed Axact's scam news story, it was earlier published

in an Indian newspaper, Hindustan Times. This newspaper also stated that the owner of Axact Software Company, Shoaib Ahmed Shaikh, is a fraud and sells counterfeit degrees. Additionally, Hindustan Times published that a sensitive government organization is launching Bol TV Channel in Pakistan, all media groups are afraid because of the arrival of Bol media, and it is hiring its senior journalists and famed anchors (Times, Hindustan, 2013).

Bol TV management took legal action against the Hindustan Times story and said Indian newspapers are trying to defame Axact Company (BOL: Official Respond to Defamation Campaign, 2013, October 19).

Hindustan Times clarifies in its other story related to ISI and BOLTv Channel, in which Hindustan Times published an apology note related to Axact and Bol Channel and removed the “defame” exclusive story from their website (Hindustan Times clarifies story October 15, 2013).

Axacts’s scam story exposed by Hindustan Times was also discussed in Mubashir Lucman’s talk show Khar. In his show, it was discussed that the “plot of the news story in Hindustan Times aligned with Bol Channel was a conspiracy of the owner of the Jang Group, Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman, and a relative of Jahangir Siddiqui, a recognized businessman of India and Pakistan. Both set a plan to scandalize Bol media group; they made a deal with an Indian intelligence officer and a reporter of Hindustan Times to prepare a story in favor of the Jang group. Opponents of Bol media group Mir Shakeel Ur Rehman and Jahangir Siddiqui ordered the reporter to link this story with sensitive government organizations and spread it widely (October 28, 2013, Khara Such" on ARY News).

Dr. Tauseef Ahmed Khan stated that due to the Axact scam story, its TV channel Bol became a trending topic and centered among all media groups. Most of the employees of all media groups filled out the application form on Bol TV Channel for jobs; according to media experts from all over Pakistan, two million curriculum vitae were sent from media employees, including those in different fields. Bol TV Channel approached senior prominent journalists, well-known anchors, and reporters and offered them heavy payments three times more than their present salaries. Chief Executive Officer of Axact Software Company, Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh, “promised its employees to receive lavish lifestyles and luxuries, transport systems, health facilities, and bonuses that no media group has provided so far”.

Senior journalist Mujahid Barelvi stated that Kamran Khan was one of the leading journalists who left Geo News and became part of Bol TV Channel, following Asma Shirazi, Iftikhar Ahmed, and Mubashir Luqman, who teamed up with Bol TV media, and because of their joining, strong media groups felt economic fear. Bol TV Channel was hiring well-known journalists, anchors, and senior staff from all over the media. As a result, not only Geo News but also Dawn News and Express Dunya News started teaming up against Bol TV Channel.

“Star journalists started to leave their channels and seemingly pass into oblivion; they were actually gathering at Bol TV, a high-profile print and the electronic media arm of Axact, which had not yet gone on air.”

After the news story of the New York Times fake degrees and real cash spread in Pakistan, it affected Bol TV Channel; the newly formed channel started facing crises immediately. Well-known journalists and anchors heard an alarming bell and started to leave Bol TV Channel. Kamran Khan was the first to resign from Bol TV Channel and later joined Dunya News. “I was discussing the situation with other senior journalists associated with Bol TV and would decide after reviewing

the situation. Around four hours after the tweet, Kamran Khan announced his resignation from the channel. Myself and many respected senior journalists associated with BOL TV reviewing the situation threadbare will make judgment soon; truth must prevail."

Dr. Osama Shafiq stated that the closure of Bol TV Channel forced more than 2000 media employees out of their jobs. During this period, every worker of Bol TV Channel stood up for his rights, and all jobless employees were suffering dead ends; therefore, they protested in all cities of Pakistan and ran a signature campaign to lift the ban from Bol TV Channel. Senior journalist Mazhar Abbas informed that consolidated media groups were afraid of the arrival of Bol TV Channel because Bol TV Channel had set a special standard of providing advanced systems, attractive salaries, and lavish facilities to its employees. No other media group could ever bring such fabulous changes to its common workers so far.

The downfall of Bol TV channel caused its takeover. Salman Iqbal, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of ARY Digital Network and owner of ARY Digital, decided to take over Bol TV's management. The aim of this move was to restore the jobs of thousands of employees, but ended this agreement after a few months. (2015, August 18, The Express Tribune).

The Sindh High Court restored all accounts of Bol TV Channel and Aexact Software Company. Bol TV Channel was supposed to go on air until the end of the year (Dawn, 2016).

Bol TV Channel started its regular transmission on December 25, 2016. During 2017, Bol TV Channel started news and other programs in different local languages (Network, 2016).

Dr. Jabbar Khatak informed me that the content of Bol TV Channel does not have quality, and instead of doing journalism, Bol TV Channel is revealing the weak points of strong and established media groups. A well-known media personality, Amir Liaquat Hussain, known as a rating star, joined Bol TV Channel; he did Ramzan Transmission and also ran the show Aisa Nahi Chalayga, which was once banned by PEMRA. (Dawn, 2016).

Days later, the Sindh High Court restored the program Aisa Nahi Chalayga and suspended the decision of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Dawn, 2016). In March 2017, Bol TV Channel launched its other news channel, PAK News. Former General Musharraf joined PAK News and ran a show called Sab Say Pehly Pakistan (Dawn, 2016).

In this study, aspects of investigation will be considered, including how and why The News International-Karachi published content on Bol Channel and Aexact. According to media experts and independent researchers, Jang Group was afraid of this upcoming channel, therefore it took it as a rival and tried to lay it down by publishing inaccurate content in an extraordinary way without including sources, as highlighted in The News International-Karachi. During this research, the perspective of the investigation will be that published material relevant to Bol Channel and Aexact Company was to be aware of the issue, or The News International-Karachi dealt with this media as rival.

The News International-Karachi is one of the most circulated and prominent English-language newspapers in Pakistan. According to media experts, The News International-Karachi did not take care of news values and could not establish principles of journalism on Bol channel and the Aexact scandal. This newspaper highlighted the Aexact scandal more than any other newspaper. Therefore, this research will explore why and how The News International-Karachi did so. Moreover, this study

will explore the issues of tiny electronic and print media groups and the consolidation of large groups' concentrations of media. Lack of PEMRA by setting no rules or policies for large media groups.

According to media experts Dr. Tauseef Ahmed Khan, Geo News took Bol Channels as a rival and tried to lay it down. According to media experts, Axt Company had been working for the last 17 years, and no media group had any dispute with it. Why did not any political, social, or media group or government think about it? But immediately after the announcement of Bol Channel, Axt Company got accused. All these things will be discussed and explored in this study.

For analysis of the study, the following research question was formulated:

What are the predominant themes of published content in The News International-Karachi from May, 2015 to May, 2017?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Framing Theory***

For the study, framing theory has been selected. Framing theory focuses on how relevant research work's coverage in the selected newspaper is presented to its readers, which influences their choices about how to process that information because media has the power to exert immediate influence on the public.

Media plays an important role in influencing the perception of the public. That is why readers have the right to know the fair structured messages on any issue presented in the newspaper. As it is essential for media to publish all issues as the same, it is equally important how issues are presented. For observation of any issue, it is indispensable to know how the narrative of a certain issue is framed in the newspaper.

So framing theory will help with the narrative of the newspaper as well as the subject of the issue the newspaper focuses on and emphasizes. With the help of framing theory, the study will explore which sort of information and investigative aspects of the study have been conveyed to the readers and which news stories were necessary to include but whose exclusion has been observed.

In light of framing theory, the study may explain the way the Axt scam is and how The News International-Karachi frames it to influence readers' understanding.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Naz and Akbar (2008) observed that quality content is hardly followed in all newspapers, and he raised some facts about reporting and news editing in his book 'Sahafati Zimmedariyan'. They said that most of the newspapers do not use appropriate language and do not fulfill the responsibilities of journalism. News is published from an unreliable source, even just to grab the attention of readers with headlines that are not relevant to the detailed given news, which is not accurate journalism.

Dr. Shafiq Jalandhri, an educationist and mass communication writer for Sahafat Sahafi aur Iblagh, discussed press issues and journalistic ethics in his book. The writer says now the media

is in a race of competition, doing nothing except increasing sensationalism and putting their own interest in the news, which left a negative impact on the public. No objectivity and fairness are found in journalism, but it is the responsibility of journalists to portray facts without fabricating news. Newspapers have become a toll of blackmailing; most of the newspapers exaggerate news to make scandals, which has decreased the standard of newspapers. Not only this, but such newspapers are biased too. All these elements spread negative factors in society and are harmful to our national security.

Dr. Tauseef Ahmed Khan closely analyzed the role of the APNS All Pakistan Newspaper Society in Freedom Pakistan, part of the Media Organizations in Freedom of Press, in his PhD thesis, and he found APNS played a better role in freedom of the press in an era of democratic government as compared to military governments.

The researcher concluded that rules to prevent collective ownership and the use of the media TV channel community in ownership are prohibited. Companies are likely the only owners of the media TV channel community. Monopoly on ownership, oligopolies (privately owned media), and the lack of diversity in media ownership or content are issues that are directly linked to questions of freedom of expression and media access.

In another study, Sarkar and Lal (2023) focused on the correlation between media ownership changes and the audience, while considering ethical considerations. A comprehensive literature analysis was conducted to assess the accessibility of material pertaining to the four objectives. The chosen approach was conducting a case study on Network 18 and NDTV, which were acquired by business conglomerates Adani and Reliance. The study was additionally done through interviews with senior journalists from NDTV, Network 18, Aajtak, ABP News, and News X. The ethical considerations and the level of engagement with the audience in journalists' content were significant concerns. The researcher has examined the ownership patterns of channels, marketing techniques, and identified the importance of ownership in media enterprises.

Otieno and Ndonye (2020) examined media ownership trends and analyzed the resulting ramifications in Kenya, with a global perspective in mind. Significantly, the media industry has garnered the attention of governments and commercial magnates worldwide. The industry is highly profitable and wields significant power and influence. Based on the literature examined in this research, it is clear that there is a scarcity of studies that have thoroughly examined the media ownership patterns in Kenya and the consequential effects of such ownership on the media market. The objective of the paper is to address three inquiries. 1) What has been the media ownership pattern in Kenya since gaining independence? 2) What is the significance of media ownership patterns in the Kenyan Media industry? 3) How does this tendency in Kenya compare to global trends? The analysis of this research indicates that the majority of media outlets in Kenya are either politically affiliated or have a political objective. Consequently, the Kenyan media is characterized by limited substance and a dearth of alternative perspectives in the news and information that is shared with the public. Furthermore, there is an absence of equilibrium as the primary objective of the media is to promote a political agenda rather than fulfilling its role as the fourth estate, which is to act as a watchdog for the government on behalf of society. The results also suggest that there are resemblances in media ownership between Kenya and other countries globally. When the political elite has the media, the established standards and principles are undermined, the autonomy of editorial decisions is distorted, and the media's influence as a cultural establishment diminishes. It is recommended that only community media has the ability to reverse the pattern that is being

set by politically owned media business.

Another study on media ownership was done by scholars Apuke and Omar (2021) from the Department of Mass Communication at Taraba State University in Nigeria. In this study, they studied and analyzed four kinds of media ownership, which is also a pattern of major media ownership in Nigeria.

- 1 Government ownership
- 2 Private ownership
- 3 Mixed ownership
- 4 Community ownership

The researcher examined that media ownership is always an issue in media discourse and the type of practiced ownership determines the freedom and efficiency of any organization, as well as the laws of media patterns, are important to both media owners and for media practitioners. He also identified the various mechanisms of control of the media in society, in which advertiser's control, legal control, and ethical control were included. The researcher found that government ownership and private ownership are more important than mixed ownership and community ownership, so it was recommended that both ownerships should be freely practiced, and the media should not be in the hands of rich people over the money of the poor.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The content analysis methodology was used for this study. The present research is qualitative, and multi-methods are used to come up with a reliable interpretation of the data and observations. Multi-method research includes the use of more than one method of data collection or research in a research study or set of related studies.

### *Sampling*

The study observes contents on selected pages of the newspaper. For the study, systematic sampling is used, and for observing the content of the newspaper, its front, back, and editorial pages are chosen because of their importance and impact. The content of these selected pages included news stories, cartoons, articles, editorials, letters to editors, etc.

While collecting data for the study, in two years 730 editions were found, excluding 6 holidays of the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS) each year, which has a total number of 12, thus 718 newspapers were available for the study.

For sampling, every second day of the newspaper is included. After sampling the available 718 newspapers, there are 359 newspapers that will be screened.

In the 359 available newspapers, there were a total of 1436 pages, including the front, back, and editorials screened. Approximately 15 news items are published every day on front and back pages, thus 10770 news items are screened; two editorials are published every day, thus 718 editorials are screened; approx. six letters to the editor are published on the editorial page, so 2154 letters to the editor are screened; four articles are published on the editorial page every day, thus 2872 articles; and the newspaper publishes one cartoon daily, so 359 cartoons are screened.

## FINDINGS

The News International-Karachi from May, 2015, to May, 2017, study on the fake degree scandal relating to Aexact Software Company and Bol TV Channel studied every second day of the newspaper and analyzed 359 newspapers. A total of 1436 pages of the front, back, and editorial pages were reviewed. After the study of 10770 news stories on front and back pages, 718 editorials, 2872 various articles, 2154 letters to the editor, and 359 cartoons on opinion pages were analyzed on the fake degree scandal relating to Aexact Software Company and Bol TV Channel in The News International-Karachi. The total number of published pieces of content relevant to the study was 72. That included 68 news stories (94.44%), three articles (4.16%), and only one (1.38%) cartoon. The News International-Karachi had not published an editorial or letters to the editor relevant to the topic.

The most published part of the total content remained news stories, 68 (94.44%). The News International-Karachi published 65 (95%) news stories on the fronts of its pages. A major part of the news stories 60 (88.23%) were published in single columns.

### *Total Published News Stories*

Column-Size	News Stories	Front	Back
4 Column	1	1	
3 Column	3	3	
Double Column	4	4	
Single Column	60	57	3

Bylines' reporter Shakeel Anjum was observed as the most published reporter, having reported 4 (17.39%) news stories.

A total of 34 (50%) news stories were reported from Islamabad as their dateline. Fake-degree scandal 20 (24.4%) remained the most published theme. A big part of the news stories 65 (95.58%) published in the year 2015 Sources of 40 (58.82%) news stories remained among correspondents. Analysis of the content showed the newspaper gave exclusive place and space to the study.

During the selected period of time, the most published themes remained fake degree scandal 20 (24.4%); they became part of the discussion in news stories, articles, and the major themes of one and only published cartoons. In the analysis of the narrative explored, there were a total of 33 various themes highlighted in the total content of the newspaper, and a total frequency of 33 various themes was observed at 82.

Thematic Distribution of Total Published Content Related to Aexact Software Company and Bol TV Channel in The News International-Karachi from May, 2015, to May, 2017, explained through tables. A total of 33 themes have been mentioned in a table and categorized in three columns: highlighted themes, their total frequency, and percentage.

### *Thematic Distribution of Total Published Content*

HIGHLIGHTED THEMES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Aexact Software Company	11	13.42%
Fake degree scandal	20	24.4%



Pakistan's reputation	4	4.88%
Bol TV Channel jobs	5	6.1%
HEC ranking details of Pakistani Universities	1	1.22%
The backing of military establishment	1	1.22%
False vision of Bol TV Channel	1	1.22%
Income of Axact	1	1.21%
Money laundering	2	2.44%
Proposing joint inquiry team	1	1.22%
Axact as a technology company	1	1.22%
Show cause notice	1	1.22%
Real owner of Axact	1	1.22%
Fake degree laws	1	1.22%
Foreign currency account	1	1.22%
FIA raids	3	3.66%
Senior journalist saving Bol TV Channel	1	1.22%
Axact's bank accounts	3	3.66%
Finding of Axact main source of income	1	1.22%
Bol TV Channel's equipment	4	4.88%
Shoab Sheikh's confessions	1	1.22%
Axact's tax exemption	2	2.44%
Shoab Sheikh's Health	1	1.22%
Hawala hundi	1	1.22%
Axact's employees arrested	3	3.64%
Labaik Channel	1	1.22%
Axact's offshore companies	1	1.22%
Axact's charge sheets	2	2.44%
Fake degree victims	3	3.66%
Bail of CEO	1	1.22%
Axact's clients details	1	1.22%
Shares of Axact	1	1.22%

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The News International-Karachi published only one cartoon during the selected period. The newspaper discussed cheating and fraud in the fake degree scandal in it. Axact Software Company worked worldwide and looted many innocent students. This scam spoiled the image of Pakistan. A cartoon was published without the name of its cartoonist. This is a violation of the ethics of journalism because it is mandatory for newspapers to publish the name of the cartoonist.

The News International-Karachi published a total of three articles relevant to the study; all three articles were published by different columnists. Columnists discussed various themes in their write-ups related to Axact Software Company and Bol TV Channel. In a selected period of time, all four articles were published between May 23, 2015, and June 6, 2015. The narrative of the three published articles exposed a multitude of facts. On the basis of these facts, some logical questions were raised, which proved these facts were weak and imbalanced.

The investigative aspect was not discussed in all three published articles; in fact, the columnist

did not raise any investigative question and also did not include any statements of Axact's employees or CEO of Axact. To make columnists' statements fair and balanced, they should have added statements of Axactians. This makes it clear that the narrative of the published articles was an imbalanced and one-sided story. The News International-Karachi published a total of 68 (94.44%) news stories relevant to the study. The newspaper's narrative was best expressed on its front pages. The analysis of the news stories brought some facts that proved that the narrative in this section did not follow standards of fair and balanced reporting.

Many news stories were repetitive. Sources of various important news stories remained correspondents. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar was the only politician to speak the most about this scandal. The newspaper had published arrested news stories about Axact Chief Executive Officer Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh and his employees, but no news story was published upon their release. The newspaper did not publish any statements by Shoaib Ahmed Sheikh or the current employees of Axact. Publishing their statements could have balanced the narrative of the newspaper. Very important information was missing in the narrative of the newspaper: An Indian newspaper, Hindustan Times, reported that Axact sold bogus degrees, on which Axact management took legal action against the newspaper. Later, Hindustan Times removed that report from the website (images attached in annex). The News International-Karachi did not include reference to that report, and this could have made the newspaper's narrative stronger.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the narrative makes clear sense; the narrative adopted by the newspaper was a one-sided story. The News International-Karachi played the role of judge in their reporting. Violation of the code of conduct of the Canon of Journalism and of the Council of Pakistan Newspapers Editors observed published content relevant to the study.

The narrative related to the Axact scam was imbalanced and weak. Moreover, proper protocols for reporting had also not been followed. The lack of proper protocols of reporting proved that The News International-Karachi did not follow standards of fair reporting and failed to balance its views.

The study shows coverage of Axact Software Company and Bol TV Channel in The News International. Karachi was the outcome of the economic war between the Jang Group and the Bol Media Group. Bol TV Channel claimed this would be the number one channel in the Pakistani media industry; therefore, they hired top-rated anchors and other staff from all big media groups, including Dunya News, Ary News, Geo News, and Express News. Most of the big names in geo news left Geo and joined Bol TV Channel. Jang Media Group felt economic fear, so both rivals fought, and media employees had to bear this loss.

When the two years' coverage was analyzed in light of formulated research questions, it was found the newspaper adopted unfair and imbalanced reporting in the narrative of the fake degree scandal relating to Axact Software Company and Bol TV Channel.

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