



Media's framing of Pandemics: A Case of the COVID-19 coverage in the Pakistani Press

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Abstract

This paper investigates how COVID-19 has been presented in the Pakistani media. It explores media behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined the usage of framing strategies in the newspapers discussing COVID-19 using a cross-sectional design in conjunction with a content analysis method. The results showed that the Pakistani press during the time of the pandemic have more coverage in conflict, uncertainty, and consequences frames. The results also showed that during the pandemic the press followed the issue attention cycle, according to extensive coverage to COVID-19 related frames during the period when the issue of COVID-19 was at its peak. The findings are a significant contribution to understanding the media's role in pandemics. The media gave more coverage to conflict, uncertainty, and consequence frames compared to the remaining three frames. Therefore, it is indicative that media content needs to be organized in such a way that avoids sensation and creates a sense of communal cohesion during the time of pandemic such as COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, media coverage, press, pandemic, framing, frames

Introduction

Media play an essential role in defining reality for the public (Yousaf, 2018; Takeshita, 1997). Since ancient times, it has played a significant role as an educator, supporter, promoter, and supplement of health education-related information (Flora et al., 1989). Framing theory is one of the most widely used theories in media analysis (Potter, 2012). It has been examined through the framing the image of nations (Ji, Hu, & Muhammad, 2016, p. 235), framing conflicts (Yousaf, Rahman & Yousaf, 2020), framing political issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 2000), coverage of technological hazards (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), and framing global warming (McComas & Shanahan, 1999). The dissemination of information about health risks is not transparent, but unpredictability and postulation are overwhelming (Berry, 2007, p. 67). According to The New York Times, the state of the world's health at the end of 2019 was once again in crisis (Wee & Wang, 2020). Later, after the SARS-CoV outbreak (BBC, 2020) and the infection had spread to 123 countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed it a pandemic and a public health emergency, respectively (CNN Indonesia, 2020; Putri, 2020).

Mass media strongly influences the general public's opinion and decision-making (Ogbodo et al., 2020). Infact, Schram (1993) argued that news is how the press reports events to the audiences. This argument supports the proposition that “when the message is emanated it is not just what is said that has a substance but also how it is stated and what is said yet could be said (MC, 1987, p.36). The conflict-orientated information dominates during the time of pandemics (Reynolds & Crouse, 2008). UK media has faced challenges during the global pandemic (Ebola) from 2014 to 2015 because not all pandemic was esteemed equivalent by the media. Western media framed the Ebola injection in the UK newspaper as the infection risk assumed a vital function in shaping the audience's perception of a health crisis. The press

remains divided on whether the pandemic should be treated as a local or global issue (Pieri, 2019). Media framing serves the mass audience to interpret the risk with various means, in opposition to the communicators' intentions similar to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The primary theme and legitimate voice of CDC and primetime shows communicate differently (Kott and Limaye, 2016).

In a similar vein, increased emphasis on H1N1 threats in news reporting may have heightened the drama (Klemm et al., 2016). In spite, the media has less focused on reports about health matters than on crime, politics, and entertainment (Gupta and Sinha, 2010). The media gives less prominence to health issues (Liu, 2011).

However, the lackluster coverage of the expanding COVID-19 epidemic may lead to further global health problems (Adejoro, 2020). Media framing the pandemic may have emphasized public fear or absence of it figuratively speaking in 2001 when Anthrax health emergence was accounted for (Mebane, 2001). In term, the World Health Organization scoffed at this and advised the media to protect the public by reporting news stories with facts and data (CDC, 2020). Naturally, it is not an easy task for health specialists to communicate information about emerging, crisis-related, and fast-changing health hazards to the general population. However, prevention efforts may be in danger if the source of information for a large audience is mass media rather than general health professionals (Schwitzer, 2004). Voss (2002) claimed that lacking, misleading, or fragmented news reporting comprises a general health risk. Given that people may make health-related decisions depending on the coverage of the mass media that such choices have vast consequences on account of highly profoundly infectious diseases.

It is clear from this context that using the media to stay informed about our modern environment is one way to do so. It is easier for the audience to interpret and form an opinion about the issue via content, picture, and symbols (Tolley, 2016). Media give essential information to the general public through news frames which frequently impacted on opinions

and decisions of the general audience (Ofori-Birikorang, 2010). Framing can have a significant impact on how the public perceives and understands an issue, as well as how they respond to it (Chime-Nganya et al., 2017). The infection outbreak could make an example of frame disease has demonstrated that media public consideration broadens to an assortment of causes and solutions regarding frame dominance (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). In terms of the tone of the news frame, Greenslade (2015) noted that media coverage of the story toward negative than positive. It is perceptible that mass media regarding COVID-19 excited the consequences, emphasizing the peril of the spread of the infection around the globe.

Prior research recommended using network analysis techniques to examine news content. For instance, the Network Agenda Setting Model (NAS) investigates the relationship between the silence of the network and attributes in which *El Mundo* Spanish newspaper frames depicted political center-left media. In contrast, *El Pais* news frames represented political stance regarding COVID-19 (Hallin, 2020). Moreover, the New York Times focused on six news frames, including uncertainty, action, conflict, reassurance, news evidence, and consequences during news coverage of mad cow infection (Shih, Wijaya, and Brossard, 2008). Another research conducted by Singaporean Straits Times focused on nine dominant frames via manual coding during coverage of H1N1 pandemic (Lee and Basnyat, 2013). It is noticeable that media frames stories and such stories of words based on different frames, which media organizations have decided in respect of COVID-19. The present study investigates the context of Pakistani leading print media, which is that dynamic information was not fully presented in the earlier study. Against the background, this research focused on Print Media, especially Jang, Naw-e-Waqt, The Nation, and Dawn attempts to answer the questions regarding how Pakistani newspapers frame health (COVI-19) during lockdown from March 7, 2020, to July 2020.

Literature Review

Health Education and Role of the Mass Media

Mass media assume a vital function in creating awareness regarding pandemics besides providing information on a broader level. Media not only disseminate awareness but also provide information and educate the public. It is an instrument for acquiring behavior change, attitude, and beliefs regarding health (Sharma & Gupta, 2017). Similarly, mass media gives importance to health-related awareness dealing with everyday life, especially about health (Gupta & Sharma, 2015).

Trends in the news media that have an impact on public health include changes in the traditional media, an increased range of news and digital news sources, and an ease with which deceit can spread (Gollust, Fowler & Niederdeppe, 2019). The role of media as surveillance includes bringing the public up to speed on health concerns with a moderator amount of health information (Wang, 2010). The role of media as surveillance requires that they screen society and give information to individuals. Therefore, its surveillance role indicates that they constantly examine society and in inform well as warn society about upcoming threats. Accordingly, the media must ensure that the individual is adequately warned of danger (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). By referring to Lass well (2007), mass media specifically performs four functions in a given society. According to Bennett & Glasgow (2009), media informs the public on social issues vis-à-vis media advocacy strategies to improve the general public's health.

Meanwhile, media coverage seems to elicit change in policies and programs of government. For the most part, the government of each as a result of fiscal provisions, the country is leading the way in upgrading the health sector. Throughout, media coverage has impacted the general public's behavior (Gever & Essien, 2017).

In this context, Ankomah et al. (2014) analyzed the impact of programs broadcasted by radio programmers on the use of anti-malaria products. Gupta & Sinha (2010) argued that print and electronic news media give less attention to health issues than crime, politics, and entertainment segments. Health issues are the most ignored issue in media coverage (Onyeizu & Binta, 2014). Thus the argument is supported by instant literature that shows that media fails to set the agenda for different aspects of health issues (Yousaf, Li, Yousaf, 2020). According to Bowen, there is a significant correlation between media messaging and the use of treatment bed net in Cameroon (2013).

Framing

Understanding the framing consolidates by categorizing specific perceptions on events or issues that require an enormous scope of text data analysis with manual annotation. Most of the time, media has used episodic and thematic frames. Episodic frames in news stories generally show public issues regarding concrete events, concentrating on events that include individuals situated at a specific place and at the exact time (Gyong, 2013). In comparison, thematic news frames are used to emphasize general conditions (Moto, 2012).

Greussing and Boomgarren (2017) investigated the elements that affect the frame's pattern. For instance, the illness outbreak can create a pattern frame. The sickness has shown that public media consideration is expanding to include different aspects of cause and remedy with reference to frame dominance. It benefited from a well-known frame categorization that summed up across difficulties. Other frames categorized are issue explicit. Even though issue-specific categories are schemes that do not consider analyzing patterns and give details (Amber et al., 2013). The philosophical idea known as framing theory makes clear which aspects of the news are explicitly molded and contextualized by a media source (McQuail, 2005). According to Goffman (2019), frames are psychological constructs that govern how events are represented. When framing, media indicates how much a particular issue has been covered. The media

minimize what is outside the frame by silencing what is outside the frame and focusing the audience's attention on certain concerns, thoughts, and ideas.

According to Entman, "to frame is to select some of a perceived reality and make them more silent in communicating text "(p.20). The development of framing typology has to be focused on the dramatic and substantive aspects of the event. In terms of media, give the greatest attention to the most effective issue and perform through the accentuation of crisis, individual events before or future, and conflicts (Bennett, 2001). Similarly, "strategy/conflict" and death are considered the most prominent frames in media (Nisbet et al., 2003). While biotechnology, dramatic included ethnic, uncertainty and strategy/conflict frames were dominant during news coverage, particularly in print media (Nisbet & Huge, 2006).

Q1: which frames were dominant in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pakistani press?

Media Framing and Pandemic

Media framing has gained importance in reporting on COVID-19 crisis management interventions as well as in influencing public discourse. Conversely, news media agencies surged into covering the outbreak of COVID-19 from different angles; exceptionally, the BBC featured the news stories about the pandemic being a pessimistic way. People's Daily newspaper framed news stories more neutrally and optimistically than CNN covered news stories in the least pessimistic way. In contrast, news stories of the selected newspapers observed multiple news frames which news stories framed with the human interest by CNN, People's Daily reported stories with the depiction of responsibility news frames, and Al-Jazeera had stories based on economic consequences which represented in initial stage January 1, 2020, to February 29, 2020 (Mutua & Onga, 2020).

It appears that in the cases of SARS, MERS, and the current COVID-19 pandemic, the media has triumphed as a significant agent. Facts and information on the health crisis brought on

by an unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic had negative financial, physical, psychological, and economic effects. As a result, information issues that were brought on by unpredictability and risk can result in a loss of confidence and respect for the media when they are not managed properly, which can affect not only how the economic crisis is documented but also how the issue is addressed when COVID-19 flares up (Ophir, 2018).

Health-related news vigorously depends on health experts, but the placement of health news stories with statistical information must be dealt with more carefully and with due significance when broadcast and presented to a mass audience. By refereeing the Sankaranayanan & Rajkamal (2020) analyzed coverage by used space, and cited sources frames about SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV between January 5, 2020, to Feb 2020 in two leading Malayalam dailies. Both newspapers have not kept up a similar significance to the news media when required, and it is depicted in such a way that the agenda has been pre-set to sort of health news. As the New York Times editorial reporting between January 2020 to March 2020 put attention on negative frames and dominant constructive about the outbreak of COVID-19 most dominant frames were observed as "Solution-Oriented" and "Numerical" while prevailing frames among negative observed "Blame Attribution," "Conflict" and Consequences" Although, blame attribution were predominant as compared to the solidarity frame while Daniel was prevailed as compared to the frame of concern (Farima,2020).

News reports have been found among two leading newspapers, including the New York Times from America and Global Times from China, whether broadcasted and printed with three discourses: microstructure, macrostructure, and superstructure, using the New Schematic framework of Van Dijk. The communist party of China's propaganda, ineffectiveness in containing the outbreak, incapacity to contain the virus, inadequacy in providing medical supplies, and authoritarian treatment of the populace and medical personnel were highlighted in the news stories published by the New York Times. Meanwhile, Global Times put more attention

on negative stories about the pandemic in the US related to the lack of testing kits and medical supplies. Moreover, people in the US reported anger and restlessness due to the moderate reaction of the government and costly medical services (Abbas, 2020).

Frames for the Chinese outbreak, social effect, and health crisis found noticeable differences among anglophone and francophone media. Divergence in received information amidst anglophone mass audience than between francophone mass audience. Despite the fact that we live in an era of global information, different nations nevertheless present the same news item in a variety of ways (Willian Poirier et al., 2020). Furthermore, political and economic-oriented frames related to pandemics reported in Nigerian newspapers (Daily Trust and Vanguard) are based on cardinal points of the country. The tone of the news stories between both newspapers covered with negative frames compared to positive and neutral by using framing theory while minimize significant frames like health, safety, and quality of life (Msguhter & Philips, 2020).

Sentiments, the risk presented attribution of blame; shock and outrage were significantly different among 600 tweets related to the outbreak of COVID-19 between February and March 2020. In particular, the risk was more significantly reported in February than in March. Most of the Tweets observed not note any specific risk, but the majority of tweets related to the COVID-19 crisis did not present particular blame; more blame was extended in February than March while outrage fluctuated in different ways with hazards for the most part being higher in February and outrage being more adverse in March 2020 during Pandemic (Damino, Jennifer & Cattellier, 2020). So that, 357 news stories format among Nigerian two TV stations, newspapers, and radio station.

In order to compare the news coverage of Ebola with that of other infections during the Ebola outbreak, Ballester and Villafranca (2016) examined two newspapers. Ebola news

headlines regularly use the word "Terror," which increases fear about the disease more than it does with other illnesses. Similar to how the "Conflict" frame affects the gateway of the two newspapers, which confirms worrisome messages for the general public even as the total amount of visual material rapidly increased during the first two days of the COVID-19 crisis and decreased starting on day five. Overall, it portrayed the first two days of the Covid-19 outbreak as the "High Risk" phase and the fifth day in advance of the "Less Severe" phase (Catalan et al., 2020). Another empirical study was carried out in 2013 by Lee and Basnyat on Straits Time, a Singapore newspaper, to analyse news coverage of the H1N1 pandemic. They identified nine recurring frames using manual coding, including information, preventive information, clinical exploration, social setting, economic context, financial context, political context, and a personal context. In comparison to other news frames, the H1N1 information updates and presentations received more attention in this newspaper.

Q2: How did media attention shift over time of Pandemic COVID-19?

Issue Attention Cycle and Media Coverage

The issue in the public agenda goes back and forth, and they follow fixed dynamics of attention for intensity and coherence of communication. Likewise, the sub-topics of the issue essentially show how the stories of the issue are constructed throughout the time (McGillivray, 2013). The issue attention cycle in media changes with time (Toukhy, 2017).

According to Waldherr (2014), the majority of journalists report a point; the more closely related the subject, the more valuable it becomes; the journalists sense one another and adapt their reporting; and the attention given to the specific issue grows daily. An crucial factor in this is proximity. According to Fond, Gaman, Brunel, Haffen, and Llorca (2015), news reports mentioned Catherine Zeta-Jones' bipolar disorder therapy. In a similar vein, public opinion appears to be more influenced by media events than by actual occurrences (Fond et al., 2015).

Actual realities and mediated realities frequently diverge. The episodic structure of media coverage draws attention for a brief period before shifting to a different topic (Cacciatore, Nowak, and Evans, 2018).

Down (1972) proposed five stages of the "issue Attention Cycle. The pre-problem stage is termed the first stage. The second stage deals with awareness of the issue. When the public understands the pros and cons of the issues, it is termed the third stage. When the public diverts attention from the issues, it is termed the fourth stage. During the last stage, the issues are replaced by other issues. Nisbet & Hume (2007) observed that the prominence of frames differs across different stages of issue development. Keeping this literature in view, we proposed

Q3: Is there any difference in frames prominence between the different stages of the issue attention cycle of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional design vis-à-vis a content analysis method to examine how the fatal COVID-19 illness was presented in Pakistan's top media. The content analysis method deals with the written communication text (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). Four prominent Pakistani newspapers, including "The Nation," "Dawn," "Jang," and "Naw-e-Waqt," were chosen for investigation in this study. These publications were chosen with consideration for a recent survey of the general public's media consumption (Yousaf, 2018). According to this survey, the Dawn and The nation among the English, Jang, and Nawa-i-Waqt are widely circulated and read newspapers.

Moreover, the results of our piloting indicated that media outlets used different frames to frame the Pandemic (COVID-19) in Urdu and English newspapers. Media frames can influence inter-media agenda-setting (Malek, 1997). The most comprehensive online collection of news sources available from LexisNexis was utilized to search for certain terms in selected newspapers' news articles. We chose the time period between March 2020 and August 2020 for

the news stories that appeared in the top publications. Each story was the unit of analysis for this research. There are different techniques used to identify frames (for example see, Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Nisbet & Huge, 2006). However, this paper followed the method developed by (Shih, Wijaya & Brossard, 2008).

Results

This study analyzed 1,145 editors to answer the research question. The Chi-Square Test of difference showed (hereafter χ^2) shows that there is a significant difference among six frames published in English and Urdu press (5, N=1145) =141.367, $p < .000$; Cramer's $V=0.345$, $p < .005$. Table 1 indicates that the proportion of editorials published in Urdu Press differs significantly compared to the English press.

Table 1 Comparison between the six News Frames and Urdu and English Press

Press	Frames						Total
	Consequence	Uncertainty	Action	Reassurance	Conflict	New Evidence	
Urdu Press	100	400	40	18	140	9	707
English Press	97	108	67	43	95	28	438
Total	197	508	107	61	235	37	1145

Table 2 shows the month-wise comparison of the six frames used by the Pakistani media to cover the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the six frames, uncertainty frames received extensive coverage, followed by conflict, action, and consequence frames. The other two frames, i.e., Reassurance and new evidence, get the least coverage. The novel nature of COVID-19 gets

media attention. We analyzed the Urdu and English newspapers separately to determine which gave more coverage to selected frames. It was found that Urdu newspapers gave more coverage to uncertainty and conflict frames than the English press. However, consequence frames get similar coverage in Urdu and English newspapers (Table1).

Table 2: Month-wise Comparison between the six News Frames in the Pakistani Press

Months	Frames in Pakistani Press						
	Consequence	Uncertainty	Action	Reassurance	Conflict	New Evidence	Total
March	10	53	4	0	13	0	80
April	27	72	14	12	40	5	170
May	35	91	37	17	40	7	227
June	64	181	39	14	78	15	391
July	61	111	13	18	64	10	277
Total	197	508	107	61	235	37	1145

Discussion

Drawing upon the theory “Media Framing” and Issue Attention concept, the current study was aimed to understand what types of frames are used by leading Urdu and English print Pakistani media (Jang, Nawe-Waqt, The Nation and Dawn) and how the media attention shift over time of period. Few frames emerged during the coverage of disease reproduces with the reasoning that journalists tend to utilize similar topics for stories of similar nature (Bennett, 2001). By analyzing 1,145 news stories published in Jang, Naw-e-Waqt, Dawn, and The Nation over a five-month (March-July, 2021), the Chi-Square test of difference showed that the difference significant difference among six frames in English and Urdu press. The Fisher Exact test indicated, as shown in Table 1, differences among six frames in four newspapers, including two English and two Urdu. Although, Urdu newspapers (Jang and Naw e Waqt) have published more news stories during the selected period of the Pandemic as compared to English newspapers (Dawn, The Nation).

In response to the first research question, the following results show that uncertainty frames among coverage have received extensive coverage followed by conflict, action, and consequence frames. As discussed in growing literature, media covering infection diseases tend to concentrate on their consideration of substantive aspects of epidemic hazards" (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008). Looking at the content analysis, Urdu newspapers gave more attention to uncertainty and conflict frame as compared to the English press as shown in Tables 1 and 2. On the other hand, Reassurance and New Evidence frames get the least coverage during selected time frames. According to Shih & Bossard (2009), framing is the coverage dependent on action and considered the sources. Besides, the consequence is another prominent frame in the coverage of deadly diseases. Similarly, the amount of coverage a deadly infected disease received extensive influenced by the number of infected cases and sort of government actions taken" (Shih et al., 2008). In addition to the literature on framing of coverage of inflammation diseases, news stories on pandemics are often accompanied by uncertainty and urgency due to individuals heavily depending on the news to get information regarding infectious diseases (Lee, 2014).

Furthermore, the second question is about media attention shift over time to the outbreak of COVID-19 under study. The following results showed that Urdu and English newspapers separately determined which gave more coverage and attention shift over time. Coverage of infectious COVID-19 gets more coverage with different frames gets extensively reported. An analysis of the shift in frames across the time frame of March to July was taken into account when the intensity of frames was more likely high based on the month. Interestingly, for four newspapers (two English and two Urdu), the number of news stories written about the intensity of COVID-19 increased as the month progressed. However, most of the stories were under the uncertainty and conflict frame analyzed in June for Urdu newspapers. Another significant frame of "conflict" covered by the Urdu press was progressed with the passage of the month. For the English press, the majority were stories about the most prominent frames that were told in June.

However, for both press, news stories were the greatest in number in May, and June. As expected, depending on the content analysis, not all outbreaks yield similar outcomes (Ophir, 2018).

Furthermore, differences and similarities in frame prominence between selected different months of issue attention cycle of disease. Frames like conflict and consequence are more frequent appeared during five selected months of COVID-19. The shift of frames in news stories about deadly viruses revealed a different pattern. Media covered the disease more frequently as uncertainty and action from May to July 2021. The current study was also compared the frames that appeared during the months (March-July) when the virus was active. The media's intensity of attention to the disease can be shown in terms of the prominence of news stories. It refers to the hierarchy of editorial importance offered by a journalist (Graber, 1988). In addition to this, the findings also support the issue attention cycle, the issue of COVID-19 was at its peak in the June and July months, therefore, the media gave extensive coverage during these months to the COVID-19 related frames. These findings are also consistent with the existing literature (Cacciatore, Nowak, and Evans, 2018; Down, 1972; Fond, Gaman, Brunel, Haffen, and Llorca, 2015; Gillivray, 2013; Toukhy, 2017; Waldherr, 2014).

Conclusion

The following result of this study showed that news media framed infectious diseases from a different angle. In case, the media might be focused on a substantive aspect of the issue (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Sometimes journalists play with the stories about risks related to the hazardous issue when these risks affect their community (Griffin, Dunwoody, & Gehrman, 1995). The novel nature of COVID-19 gets media attention. There is a significant relationship between the adopted six frames in English and Urdu English media.

Interestingly, the time frame was the most significant focus on COVID-19 virus coverage was from March 2021 to July 2021, when the virus is active worldwide. In addition, it has been observed that shift of frames among the different stages of the issue attention cycle for the virus. Regarding the novel,

COVID-19 drew little media attention in the starting month, like March 2020. The amount of coverage progressed when the intensity of the virus occurred. Through the comparison of English and Urdu newspapers, it is highlighted that Urdu newspapers gave more coverage to selected frames than English Press. On the contrary. The consequence frame gets similar coverage in both English and Urdu newspapers.

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Contemporary media Culture and Communication (pp.144-161) Edition: First Chapter: Part II –
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