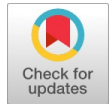


# Media Framing of COVID-19 Crisis in Print Media

Afroz Yunus Khan, M. Shafey Kidwai



**Abstract:** Since the coronavirus outbreak, the Media houses have focused on the health crisis fittingly. The news of the pandemic spread faster than the virus itself. The impact of media does not only originate with what information is being disseminated but also how it is framed. It gives Mass Media the credit for forming Public Opinion. This study aims to determine and compare the dominant frames in coverage of COVID-19 news. Based on readership and popularity, two English and two Hindi newspapers are selected. The study, descriptive in nature, uses Content Analysis as a tool of analysis. With the deductive approach, the researcher considered pre-determined frames (extracted from the previous literature) analyzed and compared the stories according to them. The time frame of this study was two months, starting from April 1, when the second wave in India intensified, to May 31, 2021. The unit of analysis included all articles, features, and columns published within the time frame. It was discovered that the Hope frame (18.4%) and Fear frame (16.8%) dominated the overall study. It was also found that there were similarities and differences in framing used by both English and Hindi newspapers.

**Keywords:** Frames; Media Framing; Covid 19; Content Analysis; Aligarh

## I. INTRODUCTION

The world is combating the current health crises through different means and measures. The finest alternative to curb the contagious virus's infection rate is to be aware of it. The Media can best administer this role. The media in different parts of the world are trying to mentor their audience to safeguard themselves and others from it. In the context of India, there is a surge of information and even misinformation through various authorized and unauthorized organizations. The first confirmed coronavirus case in India was reported on January 27, 2020 (NCBI Report, 2021) [1]. Thenceforth, the cases gushed and peaked at disastrous levels. As of March 10, 2023, the total number of infected Indians shot up to 44.7 million, with more than 5.31 lac fatalities (John Hopkins, 2023). Since the ongoing coronavirus epidemic outbreak, the media have started extensively reporting on it.

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This demands that the media be vigilant in reporting the stories based on the pandemic to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 infection. Saddled with the responsibility of educating the masses on contemporary issues and developments, the media advertently have to present the stories in a way that does not create havoc in their minds. This study focused on portraying COVID-19 coverage when the second peak intensified.

## II. MEDIA FRAMING

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of media framing in his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* in 1974. The theory, employed by many scholars, helps to gauge public opinion and its socio-political effects on society. Any news that reaches the audience infiltrates through facts amalgamated with previous knowledge and cultural experience. A 'frame' is a window through which a story is told (Tuchman, 1978). 'Framing' is an outcome of fastidiously selecting facts from the perceived reality (Entman, 1993). Media may promote or conceal information according to the ideology and other agendas. It allows the media to take advantage of compelling people what to think about and how to think about any issue. The development of news stories is done by creating or synching the meanings of the stories, which may have pre-conceived notions of the journalists (Van Gorp, 2010). Lee (2010) suggests that journalists employ various frames to highlight specific issues and ascertain particular meanings to a story. "Media framing influences how news is covered and presented to people" (Kumar A., 2016). Such characteristics necessitate the Media to be keen-eyed while framing the stories on sensitive issues, especially health crises or pandemics. Thus, framing is a prominent method through which the media form mass opinion and can change people's outlook (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

### A. COVID-19 and Media:

Past health crises reveal that the Media have performed its role in propagating the message of taking preventive measures and adopting preventive behaviors (Zhou et al., 2019). By the end of January 2020, the announcement of COVID-19 as a global threat to public health propelled many countries to take immediate action against it to safeguard their people (Mutua and Ong'ong'a, 2020) [3]. International media also started propagating and disseminating information regarding the disease. They used different media frames to inform the spreading of contagious viruses (Poirier et al., 2020).



Morissan, Abdul Wahab, Siang, and Cahyowati (2020) reported that the importance of fear as a concept in the coverage of the pandemic was more an output of public fear than the actual reporting of accurate information. Literature on health crises reveals that media have guided the masses to be aware, prevent, scare, and form a particular opinion shaped through the media framing (Gerlach, 2016) [2]. In the initial days, the media utilized threatening and scaremongering phrases to describe the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe (Mutua and Ong'ong'a, 2020). Since the first case was reported in India, its media spaces have been full of news stories covering health emergencies. "The info-graphics in The Hindu and The Times of India noticeably shape the risk perception" (Jacob, 2020) [4]. People turned to the media for their source of information regarding the pandemic.

### B. Research Questions:

**RQ1:** What are the dominant frames in the coverage of COVID-19 crises?

**RQ2:** Are the frames used by English media similar to those used by Hindi?

**RQ3:** Are the frames used by English media different from those used by Hindi?

**RQ4:** Which language newspaper has employed more front-page headlines?

### III. DATA AND METHOD

"Content Analysis is one of the methodological techniques used to study Media Frames." (McQuail, 2005) [5]. Thus, the study employs content analysis as a primary method to study frames through a Quantitative approach. The time frame of this study is two months (i.e., 61 days), starting from April 1, when the second wave in India intensified, to May 31, 2021. To study the dominant frames applied in portraying COVID-19, the researcher has chosen four newspapers (two English and Hindi each) that are the most circulated and popular in her region, i.e., Aligarh. The Times of India and The Hindu were selected among the English newspapers, whereas Dainik Jagaran and Amar Ujala were among the Hindi dailies. Aligarh receives the Delhi edition of The Times of India and The Hindu. The Hindi dailies were available in the Aligarh edition. The Times of India and Dainik Jagran were sourced from 'Magzter Digital Newsstand', whereas the others were procured from 'Maulana Azad Library of Aligarh Muslim University'. The selection of the sample, being judgmental, was based on the placement of the story in the newspaper, including the headline of the front page, followed by stories covering more space/columns prioritized with the photograph, info-graphics, and caption (Jacob, 2020). Using the framing theory, this study analyses the set of selected data, comprising two stories/articles from each day of the study, totaling up to 488 (61\*4\*2) stories. The study utilizes a deductive approach, which "involves predefining certain frames as content analytical variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news" (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Inspired by the work of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) [6], the researcher has selected the 'Human Interest frame', 'Economic Consequence frame', 'Attribution of responsibility frame, and 'Conflict frame'. Along with these popular frames of media portrayal, the researcher has included three more frames (the

fear/Scaremongering frame', the hope frame' and the politicization frame'), which came from the influential work of Ogbodo et al. (2020) [7]. They introduced these frames (Fear and Hope) while analyzing the global media framing of COVID-19. The researcher analyzed each article for understanding and finding out frames. For this, all the pre-selected frames were read and comprehended properly as these selected frames are based on specific questions, which can be ascribed to that selected article when answered. This comprehension of frames and their questions is based on the previous studies of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), Ruigrok et al. (2005) [8], and Carpenter (2007) [9]. While studying the articles, the researcher marked yes/no for all the questions related to each frame. A particular frame was ascribed to the article if the answer to its question resulted in affirmation. Continuing the same method, below is the description of the set of the chosen frames:

**Human Interest Frame:** Employing the human face while portraying a story, this frame is generally used to raise human connections and emotional appeal with their readers. According to Bennett (1990) [10], in the cut-throat competition of the news market, journalists and editors consciously compose a story that grabs the audience's attention and holds onto their interests. The story about a family's suffering or a lady's determination and strength to cope with the pandemic can be considered an example of a Human interest frame.

**Economic Consequence Frame:** This has been identified as a common frame by Neuman et al. (1992) [11]. Any important issue has a consequence and an impact on the economy. Similar is this pandemic, which has affected the country in various economic ways, including the gains and the losses. All such stories are placed under the economic consequence frame.

**Politicization Frame:** This frame presupposes the stories that involve some diplomatic angle or negotiations. "Pandemic has pitted political parties against each other" (Ogbodo et al, 2020). The stories sensitizing the issue by the politicians were also included in this frame. While battling the pandemic, India saw a souring dialogue between the Centre and the States. Additionally, there was a surge in the questions raised by the Opposition Parties and Social Activists about the delayed actions taken to combat the epidemic at the Central level. A public health crisis is an event in which people see the government's capacity clearly, so it has numerous triggers that can change people's attitudes toward the government (Jo & Chang, 2020) [12]. Such negotiations over an issue politicize it and give it a dramatic look.

**Attribution of Responsibility Frame:** The framing is considered an Attribution of responsibility frame when a story is being ascribed to the government, a person, or an organization for the cause and effect of an issue (Semetko and Valkenburg, p.96, 2000). The blame game mainly accompanies the occurrence of any calamity. All the stories which accord the responsibility of someone are listed under this frame.

**Conflict Frame:** In handling the situation of such an epidemic, the reports of the Centre opposing the States or the patients' families accusing the hospital or the doctors of any carelessness reflect the state of Conflict. Apart from this, such crisis becomes similar to war-like situations where the army men, doctors, health staff, and government officials align themselves to battle against the contagious disease, which in many cases creates a rift between them (Ogbodo et al., 2020). All the stories akin to such falling out are classified as conflict frames.

**Fear/Scaremongering Frame:** This frame was derived from Ogbodo et al. (2020). According to them, "fear can, sometimes, kill faster than the pandemic". They have used this frame for stories that had the content of frightening masses or creating havoc. This frame remained dominant in almost all the coverage since the outbreak of this pandemic.

**Hope Frame:** Like the Fear frame, Ogbodo et al. (2020) also inspired the hope frame. Contrary to those mentioned earlier, such stories tried to bring a ray of Hope to people. Despite the bombardment of grim stories from almost all the media, such stories are ideally credited to the mass media for composing a story in an optimistic way to guide the masses to look forward to the fight against the coronavirus.

**Neutral Frame:** Stories reporting mere facts and figures without attributing any strong emotions or sentiments are included in this frame. Recurrent sky-touching fatalities figures have to be reported without making the readers grim about the situation and not creating panic in the masses; the media deliberately opt for this frame to keep the condition calm. While assessing the tone of the COVID-19 coverage, Morissan, Abdul Wahab, Siang, & Cahyowati (2020) [13][17][18][19][20][21] argued that the neutral frame was the most dominant among the three frames (alarming, reassuring, and neutral).

#### IV. RESULTS

In the overall data (Table 1), the Hope frame dominated the coverage of health crisis communications with 18.44%, followed by the Fear/scaremongering frame with 16.80%. In contrast, the selected media utilized the Economic Consequence Frame the least, which counts as low as 7.99%. In The Times of India, maximum coverage was done through the lens of the Fear/ scaremongering frame with 22.95%, followed by the Hope frame, which is 21.31%, and the usage of the neutral frame remained lowest in the coverage, i.e., 5.73%. The Hindu has published more stories of Hope, with 18.85% of all coverage, and subsequently, the Human interest frame remains at 18.03%. It has focused comparatively less on the Economic consequence of the issue than the other frames, with 4.91%.

Similar to the overall data, the Hope frame dominated the pandemic coverage by Dainik Jagaran with 19.67%, which is ahead of the Politicization frame with 18.03%. The sample showed the same number of least used frames, i.e., the Human Interest and Attribution of Responsibility frames by Dainik Jagaran, with 7.37% each. Fear/scaremongering frame dominated another Hindi daily with 18.85%, Amar Ujala. Right after the fear frame, it has given more emphasis on the neutral frame, with 16.39%. Economic consequence and Attribution of responsibility frames shared the least used

position by Amar Ujala with 6.55% each. Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of frames used by each media.

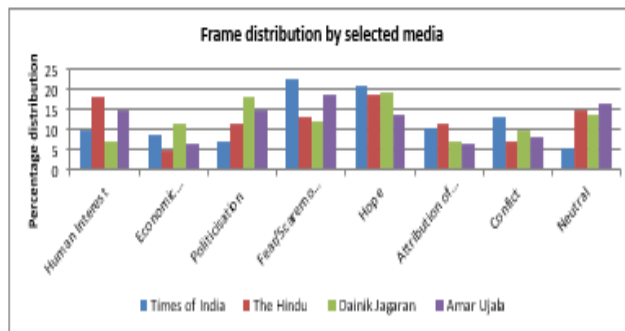


Figure 1: Frame Distribution (Percentage) by the Selected Media

The data were also analyzed based on the language of the selected dailies. Table 2 reflects the percentage distribution of English and Hindi dailies, respectively. The data were segregated according to the language of the newspaper. The Times of India and The Hindu were clubbed together to analyze media portrayal by English media, whereas Dainik Jagaran and Amar Ujala were combined for Hindi media. English media have employed the Hope frame the most, with 20.08%; after that, the Fear frame dominated the coverage of the present-day health crisis at 18.03%. Both English papers collectively have the least used Economic Consequence frame with 6.96%. In the English media fashion, Hope Frame also tops the Hindi media with 16.80%. The politicization frame stood second in the coverage with 16.39%; on the contrary, the Attribution of Responsibility frame remained at the bottom with 6.96%. This analysis is illustrated in Figure 2.

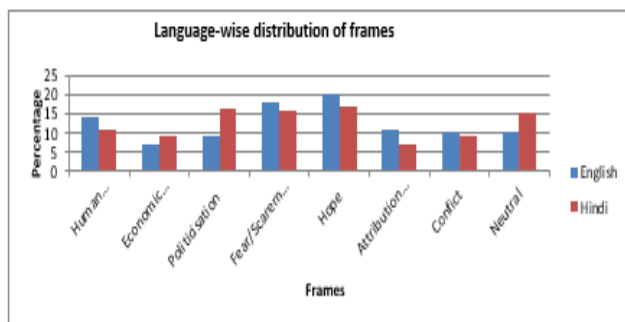


Figure 2: Language-Wise Percentage Distribution of Frames

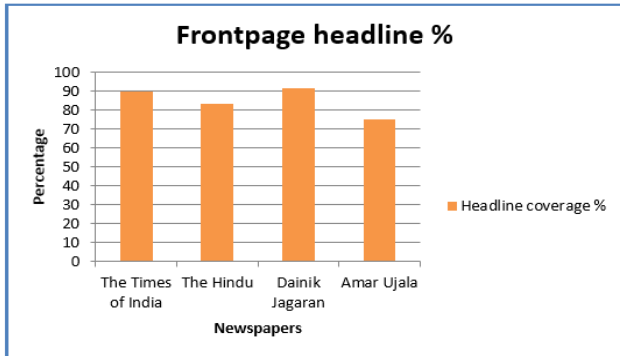
Based on the totality of frames, the researcher found differences between the English and the Hindi dailies. Regarding the selected Hindi newspapers, the Politicization frame (63.49%) and Neutral frame (59.67%) were more in the articles than selected English newspapers. In contrast, the Attribution of Responsibility frame was found to be more in the articles of English newspapers in comparison to Hindi newspapers, as shown in Table 2. Print media have tried to play their role to the best of their capacity to make the readers aware of the pandemic and persistently suggest ways of combating the contagious disease, which is visible through the headline on the front page about the pandemic.





Table 3 depicts the percentage distribution of the coverage in the front page headline of the 61 days, Hindi media constituted 83.19% of total headlines on the front page, whereas English media counted up to 86.88%.

Among the English newspapers, The Times of India has topped with 90.16% of the coverage on front page headlines as against The Hindu, which has utilized 83.6% of its front page headline space for the coverage of the pandemic; on the other hand, Dainik Jagaran covered 91.52% of its front page headline as against Amar Ujala which has dedicated the least (among the four newspapers) space of front-page headline space for COVID coverage. Figure 3 delineates the percentage coverage of the pandemic-related news in their front page headline space.



**Figure 3: Percent Coverage of Pandemic News on Front Page Headline Space**

### V. DISCUSSION

Literature on public health crises indicates that the media are majorly responsible for forming public opinion (Nwakpu et al., 2020) [14]. During COVID-19, the media have extensively covered its updates and advances through various frames. Employing different frames while portraying health crises symbolizes that the Media are trying to warn and caution the audiences. The first research question was to determine the significant frames in the coverage of the contemporary health crisis. Throughout the study's selected time frame, the media attempted to bring a ray of Hope among people as the hope frame dominated the coverage of all selected media. In the overall analysis, the fear frame was the most common after the Hope frame. It indicates that the Media are alarming the audiences about the situation. Fear can propel the masses to take preventive and restrictive measures. In the study done by Witte and Allen (2000) [15] about the meta-analysis of fear appeals, it is concluded that fear stimuli directly or indirectly affect health behavioral changes. Significant coverage of articles was published through the Politicization, Neutral, and Human Interest frames, respectively. It was also found that the newspapers have dedicated less-needed enormous coverage over politics. It was seen as a persistent practice of churning the breaking news twenty-four-seven. It is similar to the findings of the study of COVID-19 coverage by global media done by Ogbodo et al. (2020). The media have used a neutral frame with a notable percentage. It can be ascertained that the media are trying to make the audience understand the gravity of this pandemic through the reporting of massive numbers of infected people and fatalities. Ensuring Human Interest

Frames symbolizes that media seek to impact the masses by developing connections through human stories. Most of the human interest frames were grim stories portraying the agony and suffering of the people. The last three frames employed by the media on the pandemic coverage were the Conflict frame, the Attribution of responsibility frame, and the Economic consequence frame, respectively. To cover all aspects of the pandemic, the media have not left any angle un-essayed; Conflict is one of them. The news factor, Conflict, shoots up the importance of the articles, leading that story to cover more space and be more likely to appear on the front page (Boukes et al., 2020) [16]. Similarly, the Conflict frame was used to grab more people's attention; hence, most of the stories through this frame were published on the first page. Through this, opposite views and denials of misinformation are also highlighted. The Attribution of Responsibility and Economic Consequence frames were employed the least throughout the analysis. Though these two frames were used in minimal amounts, it could have impacted the masses if the proportion of both frames were increased. Audiences are made aware of the roles and responsibilities regarding the pandemic etiquette through the Attribution of Responsibility frame. They are also made aware of the local and national economic consequences.

The second research question was to ascertain the similarities between English and Hindi media. From the analysis, it can be concluded that the Hope Frame dominated both language papers. Similarly, both papers have least employed the Economic Consequence Frame. In terms of finding a positive way of mitigating the fear among people through the Hope frame, English and Hindi newspapers have participated actively. The third research question was to discover the differences between English and Hindi media framing. In Politicization and Neutral frames, English dailies differ significantly from the Hindi dailies. Hindi media emphasize stories related to politics. It also focused on the neutral frame considerably more than English media. This indicates that Hindi newspapers promote stories by using data, facts, and figures. Hindi media has employed both frames in an incredible amount as compared to English media. On the other hand, English Media used the Attribution of Responsibility frame more significantly. This shows that English newspapers depict the accountabilities of the concerned people or institutions during the pandemic through the Attribution of Responsibility frame. The last question was to find the language newspapers with more coverage of COVID-19-related news in the front page headline. The analyses reveal that English newspapers topped the list in their coverage (Table 4). However, this pandemic remained in the headlines in most of the days' stories in all the selected newspapers except for the events of natural disasters and State elections during the selected time frame. These incidents changed the focus of the headlines from the current pandemic. More of the coverage on the front page indicates the significance of the issue given by the newspaper as it grabs the audience's attention and has a far-reaching effect. It also shows what agenda the media are trying to create.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The coronavirus disease has taken a toll on the entire world, disrupting the functioning of established institutions and governments. In this situation, media organizations must play an important role in disseminating the correct information. This study has focused on the framing analysis of Indian print media from April 1 to May 31, 2021, when the second wave emerged and peaked in India. The aim was to develop a broad understanding of the frames used during the second wave in India and to comprehend print media's role during the pandemic. Through analysis, the dominant frames in both English and Hindi dailies were discovered, and the researcher also discussed the similarities and differences in the usage of media frames among the selected English and Hindi dailies. Media can enhance the productivity of mass messages by using the correct framing to curb the effect of such pandemics, promoting public health awareness, and reducing panic and chaos among people.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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- **Funding Support:** This article has not been funded by any organizations or agencies. This independence ensures that the research is conducted with objectivity and without any external influence.
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- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Authors Contributions:** The authorship of this article is attributed equally to all participating authors.

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## Media Framing of COVID-19 Crisis in Print Media

**Table 1: Dominant Frames Employed in the Coverage of COVID-19 News**

S. No.	Frames	Times of India N=122 (%)	The Hindu N=122 (%)	Dainik Jagaran N=122 (%)	Amar Ujala N=122 (%)	Total N=488 (%)
1	Human Interest	12	22	9	18	61
		-9.83	-18.03	-7.37	-14.75	-12.5
2	Economic Consequence	11	6	14	8	39
		-9.01	-4.91	-11.47	6.55	-7.99
3	Politicisation	9	14	22	18	63
		-7.37	-11.47	-18.03	14.75	-12.9
4	Fear/Scaremongering	28	16	15	23	82
		-22.95	-13.11	-12.29	-18.85	-16.8
5	Hope	26	23	24	17	90
		-21.31	-18.85	-19.67	-13.93	-18.44
6	Attribution of Responsibility	13	14	9	8	44
		-10.65	-11.47	-7.37	-6.55	-9.01
7	Conflict	16	9	12	10	47
		-13.11	-7.37	-9.83	-8.19	-9.63
8	Neutral	7	18	17	20	62
		-5.73	-14.75	-13.93	-16.39	-12.7
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>488</b>
		<b>-100</b>	<b>-100</b>	<b>-100</b>	<b>-100</b>	<b>-100</b>

**Table 2: Frame-wise Percentage Difference Between English and Hindi Newspapers**

Frames	English (%)	Hindi (%)	Difference b/w English & Hindi
Human Interest	55.73	44.26	11.47
Economic Consequence	43.58	56.41	-12.82
Politicization	36.5	63.49	-26.98
Fear/Scaremongering	53.65	46.34	7.31
Hope	54.44	45.55	8.88
Attribution of Responsibility	61.36	38.63	22.72
Conflict	53.19	46.8	6.38
Neutral	40.32	59.67	-19.35
	50	50	0

**Table 3: Percentage Distribution of the Coverage in the Headline of the Front Page**

Language of Newspapers	Language-wise Coverage (%)`	Newspapers	Headline %
English	86.88	The Times of India	90.16
		The Hindu	83.6
Hindi	83.19	Dainik Jagaran	91.52
		Amar Ujala	75

