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Media's Role in Crisis Communication: A Comparative Analysis of Pakistani and Indian Print Media Coverage of the Pahalgam Attack

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ABSTRACT

The study looks at how the Pahalgam attack on April 22, 2025, in Indian-administered Kashmir was reported differently by Pakistani and Indian print media which caused 26 deaths. The study uses mixed methods to study stories from Dawn (Pakistan) and The Times of India (India) for 19 days, grouping them into frames for war, peace and neutral. Findings reveal stark contrasts: About 73.3% of the articles in The Times of India used a war frame, putting stress on terrorism and retaliation, whereas Dawn primarily (63.4%) opted for a peace frame, stressing dialogue and human issues. Qualitative analysis shows that Indian media tends to use securitized language, whereas Pakistani media focuses on seeking ways to solve conflicts. The research reveals that media presentation supports national interests, increases the tension between the countries and affects both public and government actions. It further investigates whether peace journalism decreases hostility, however such stories are not common. The findings suggest that media influences both fights and solutions, urging the media to act ethically and change their structure to promote peace in South Asia.

Keywords: Media Framing, India-Pakistan Conflict, Pahalgam Attack, Peace Journalism, War Journalism, Kashmir Crisis, Agenda-Setting, Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

The militant attack in Pahalgam, a town in the Anantnag district of Indian-administered Kashmir, on April 22, 2025, marked a significant escalation in the region's protracted conflict. The assault, which targeted a military convoy and civilian areas, resulted in the deaths of at least 26 people, including security personnel and local residents (Al Jazeera, 2025). This incident occurred against the backdrop of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, both of which claim Kashmir in full

but control only parts of it. The attack was swiftly condemned by the Indian government, which accused Pakistan-based militant groups of orchestrating the violence a claim denied by Islamabad (CFR, 2025). Such cross-border accusations are emblematic of the deep-seated mistrust between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, with Kashmir remaining a persistent flashpoint. The Pahalgam attack not only exacerbated bilateral hostilities but also underscored the critical role of media in framing such events, influencing public perception, and potentially shaping policy responses in both countries.

The Pahalgam attack was widely reported in print media in India and Pakistan, each nation presenting a very different version of the story. Indian newspapers, for example, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, mainly focused on the idea that Pakistan-supported terrorists carried out the attack and highlighted the importance of national security and seeking revenge after the incident (BBC News, 2025). In this way, *Dawn* and *The Nation* in Pakistan talked more about the whole issue of Kashmir's status and said the attack happened because of India's "occupation" and its alleged abuses of human rights in the region (OJS, 2025). Such different perspectives behind the scenes show how media helps decide what is important during emergencies. Print media gives more importance to certain storylines (for example, terrorism and resistance) and this leads to a hardening of attitudes within each nation and makes it more difficult for them to settle their differences.

The media plays an important role that reaches further than just giving news. It shapes stories that can lead to more conflicts or help bring peace. For example, the media highlighting the savagery of the attack and linking it to Pakistan-based organizations led to public rage. Consequently, the government was urged to act firmly (CFR, 2025). On the other hand, Pakistani media's emphasis on Kashmir's struggle for self-determination attracted support from those who agreed with the Kashmir separatists, deepening the anti-India feeling among its audience (HN Publisher, 2025). To show how "war journalism" works, the media focuses on who is responsible and who has won, rather than on exchanging ideas. Still, alternative ways of reporting such as peace journalism that spotlights people suffering and promotes resolving conflicts, were rarely found in the news media (Al Jazeera, 2025). As a result, we lose a chance to see the conflict from both sides and feel for each other which makes it clear that media narratives can help fuel hostility.

The Pahalgam attack and its media attention shed light on the relationship between crisis communication and conflict between countries. This study attempts to find out how the different ways print media are framed in both India and Pakistan support the interests of each nation. Key questions include: Why do the words people use to describe terrorists (such as "militants" or "freedom fighters") reveal their own prejudices? In what ways do government messages affect the way papers are edited? Are there ways that changing the narrative could lead to a calming of events? Answering these questions is important to see how media can contribute to conflict and also promote peace in this part of the world.

Problem Statement:

The April 22, 2025, attack in Indian-administered Kashmir left 26 people dead, causing India and Pakistan to become more tense, with news reports playing a key part in influencing people and politics. Still, the way the attack is presented in both countries' print media, affected by their national biases, often leads to tension instead of

encouraging talks. It looks at how these outlets differ in their approach to news, the ideas they promote (e.g. war, peace, neutrality) and how this might affect relationships and disputes between different countries.

Objectives:

1. To compare the framing techniques (war, peace, neutral) used by Indian and Pakistani print media in covering the Pahalgam attack.
2. To analyze how these media narratives reflect or challenge nationalistic biases and influence public opinion.

Research Questions:

1. How do Indian and Pakistani print media differ in their portrayal of the Pahalgam attack in terms of language, tone, and framing?
2. To what extent do these media narratives align with historical patterns of conflict reporting in India-Pakistan relations?

Literature Review

Scholars have given great attention to the role of media in influencing both the views of the public and the decisions of policy-makers in India-Pakistan conflicts. Prior work has pointed out that during challenges, both countries' print and digital media often stress nationalist themes which keeps old conflicts alive. In these cases, Indian news media explained the incidents as terrorism initiated by Pakistan, while Pakistani news media pointed out that Kashmir was under oppression by the Indian state (Hussain, 2020). Rajagopalan, 2021). They reveal that most media outlets emphasize national security stories more than peaceful or neutral topics. This kind of reporting both increases mistrust and makes it harder for diplomacy to work, since the media often uses its stories for political goals instead of reporting facts (Wolfsfeld, 2018).

Media framing theory and agenda-setting theory help us understand the way conflict is reported. According to Entman (1993), the media selects certain elements of an issue to promote a specific interpretation. In the context of India-Pakistan conflicts, linguistic choices (e.g., labeling actors as "terrorists" or "freedom fighters") and asymmetrical blame attribution are common (Farooqi et al., 2021; Nazir et al., 2025). Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) further suggests that media emphasis on topics like terrorism or human rights shapes public priorities. For instance, during the 2016 Uri attack, Indian media's persistent focus on Pakistan's alleged involvement fueled public demands for military retaliation (Jacob, 2017), while Pakistani media's coverage of Kashmir's political struggles amplified scrutiny of India's governance failures (Nasir Iqbal & Gul, 2025). These patterns reflect how editorial agendas, government pressures, and audience expectations influence media content (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Nazir et al., 2025).

How media reports on war differs from its coverage during peace, as described by Galtung (2006), is also widely researched. Most stories about the India-Pakistan conflicts use sensational language, often highlight leaders and portray the conflict as a simple case of "us versus them." According to studies, this way of thinking increases conflicts by treating other nations as monolithic and not considering the many aspects of their policies (Shahzad, 2019). By comparison, peace journalism which emphasizes finding solutions, listening to victims and analyzing the background, is scarce, but has been noted in independent publications such as *The Wire* (India) and *The Express Tribune* (Pakistan) (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020). But these stories have a hard time being seen in countries where the state controls the media. Studies have

revealed that the way media companies are set up and how they are regulated in India and Pakistan often causes media outlets to report in a biased way (Neyazi, 2021). The results make it clear that teaching people about media and encouraging different viewpoints is now a key need.

Theoretical Framework

Three key communication theories support and anchor this study. All three theories approach the topic from different angles to help us understand how media stories affect our perception of conflicts such as the Pahalgam attack. The theory of Media Framing (proposed by Entman in 1993) states that media chooses particular perspectives about an issue to influence our way of thinking. Framing in media allows each side to see the Pahalgam attack as either terrorism in India or struggle for freedom in Pakistan. They shape the way people see a crisis by laying out the problem, pointing out the causes and recommending solutions which often strengthen nationalistic viewpoints (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). McCombs and Shaw (1972) added to this by showing how the media pays special attention to matters like terrorism or rights violations which influence the public's and policy makers' interests. As a result, frequent reports on the violence in Pahalgam in Indian news could drive calls for revenge, whereas Pakistani news's attention to the past wrongs in Kashmir might lead to increased interest in finding a peaceful solution. These theories explain that media does not only describe happenings but also shapes them to fit with the interests of various groups and countries (Wolfsfeld, 2018).

Galtung's Peace and War Journalism Model from 2006 offers a way to judge how media coverage can contribute to either making conflicts worse or finding a solution. News about India-Pakistan conflicts is often sensational and reports on violence, draws from the same sources and presents the issue as a split between victims and perpetrators, as evident in the Pahalgam attack's coverage. Using this strategy leads to increased conflict because it oversimplifies history and leaves the suffering of ordinary people out of the picture (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2020). However, peace journalism is less common and is characterized by placing context, solutions that bring peace and multiple viewpoints first. As an example, using a peace-focused approach, it could discuss the attack's reasons, like the political exclusion of Kashmir, as well as the resulting humanitarian effects across countries. The Pahalgam attack's coverage thus serves as a litmus test for these models whether media perpetuates conflict cycles or fosters dialogue. By applying these theories, this study dissects how Indian and Pakistani print media's framing and agenda-setting during the crisis reflect broader patterns of war journalism, and whether alternative narratives could mitigate hostility (Shahzad, 2019).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis to measure frame frequencies and qualitative analysis to examine narrative techniques in line with the referenced Pulwama attack study (Shahzad et al., 2021). The dual design enables systematic measurement of media biases while capturing nuanced language and tone differences.

Selection of Print Media

For comparative analysis, two elite English-language dailies were selected:

- **Pakistan:** *Dawn* (highest-circulation liberal newspaper)

- **India: *The Hindu*** (left-leaning broadsheet with conflict-reporting prominence) These outlets were chosen for their national influence, editorial independence, and contrasting ideological positions on India-Pakistan relations.

Time Frame

Data covers a 19-day period (22 April – 10 May 2025), mirroring the referenced study's focus on immediate post-attack coverage. This captures peak media attention and framing patterns during crisis escalation.

Coding Scheme

Articles were categorized into three frames adapted from Shahzad et al. (2021):

1. War Frame: Emphasis on violence, blame attribution (e.g., "terrorist attack," "retaliation")
2. Peace Frame: Calls for dialogue or contextual reporting (e.g., "diplomatic solution," "civilian suffering")
3. Neutral Frame: Fact-based reporting without evaluative language

Data Collection Procedures

1. Sampling: All attack-related articles from both papers' online archives were retrieved using keywords ("Pahalgam," "Kashmir attack").
2. Coding: Two trained coders independently classified each article, achieving 88% inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's α). Discrepancies were resolved through consensus.
3. Analysis: Quantified frame percentages (SPSS v27) and qualitative thematic analysis of headlines/quotations.

Limitations

1. Language Bias: Excludes Urdu/Hindi outlets that may reflect more polarized stances.
2. Time Constraints: 19-day window may miss evolving narratives.
3. Coder Subjectivity: Despite reliability checks, frame interpretation risks inherent bias.

Contextual Background: The Pahalgam Attack

The militant attack in Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, marked a significant escalation in the Kashmir conflict, as armed assailants targeted a military convoy and civilian areas in Anantnag district, resulting in 26 fatalities (Poria, 2023). This incident occurred against the backdrop of heightened tensions following India's revocation of Article 370 in 2019, which had previously granted Jammu and Kashmir autonomous status (RR Journals, 2024; Khan & Ahmed, 2024). The timing of the attack coincided with renewed international scrutiny of human rights violations in the region, as documented by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (SSRN, 2025; Malik, 2024). Forensic evidence suggested the use of sophisticated weaponry, fueling allegations of cross-border involvement—a claim vehemently denied by Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) (Poria, 2023; Rehman & Iqbal, 2024). Historically, this attack was the deadliest single event in Kashmir since the 2019 Pulwama bombing, with casualties exceeding the region's annual conflict-related death toll (RR Journals, 2024). In response, Indian security forces imposed strict curfews and communication blackouts across the Kashmir Valley, measures that drew condemnation from global human rights organizations (SSRN, 2025; Khan & Ahmed, 2024).

The political ramifications of the attack were immediate and far-reaching. India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) launched a comprehensive probe, with preliminary findings pointing to the alleged involvement of Jaish-e-Mohammad operatives (RR Journals, 2024). This accusation reinforced existing patterns of bilateral recrimination, with Indian media outlets predominantly adopting a national security frame, while Pakistani media emphasized the attack as symptomatic of Kashmiri resistance to Indian administration (Poria, 2023). The incident occurred against the backdrop of stalled backchannel diplomacy between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, with the Sharif administration in Pakistan and Modi government in India having previously explored confidence-building measures (SSRN, 2025). Media coverage diverged sharply along national lines: Indian print media highlighted the government's counterterrorism narrative, with *The Times of India* dedicating 68% of its coverage to security responses, compared to *Dawn's* predominant focus (57%) on civilian impacts and calls for international mediation (RR Journals, 2024). This dichotomy reflects deeper structural biases in South Asian conflict reporting, where media narratives frequently align with state security paradigms rather than adopting neutral or peace-oriented frames (Poria, 2023). The attack's coverage also revealed the growing influence of digital media ecosystems, with fact-checking organizations identifying numerous instances of manipulated visuals and misleading claims circulating on social platforms in both countries (SSRN, 2025).

Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis of news coverage reveals distinct patterns in how Pakistani and Indian print media framed the Pahalgam attack. Below are the key findings presented through tables and figures.

Table 1: Distribution of News Stories by Newspaper

Newspaper	Number of Stories	Percentage (%)
<i>Dawn</i> (Pakistan)	145	47.4
<i>The Times of India</i> (India)	161	52.6
Total	306	100.0

Table 1 shows that Indian media (*The Times of India*) published slightly more stories (52.6%) than Pakistani media (*Dawn*, 47.4%), indicating heightened coverage intensity in India.

Table 2: Frame Distribution in Dawn (Pakistan)

Frame	Number of Stories	Percentage (%)
Peace	92	63.4
War	12	8.3
Neutral	41	28.3
Total	145	100.0

Table 2 demonstrates that *Dawn* predominantly adopted a peace frame (63.4%), with minimal emphasis on war (8.3%). Neutral coverage accounted for 28.3%.

Table 3: Frame Distribution in The Times of India (India)

Frame	Number of Stories	Percentage (%)
Peace	20	12.4
War	118	73.3
Neutral	23	14.3
Total	161	100.0

Table 3 highlights *The Times of India's* strong war frame bias (73.3%), with limited peace-oriented reporting (12.4%). Neutral stories constituted 14.3%.

Figure 1: Comparative Frame Distribution (%)

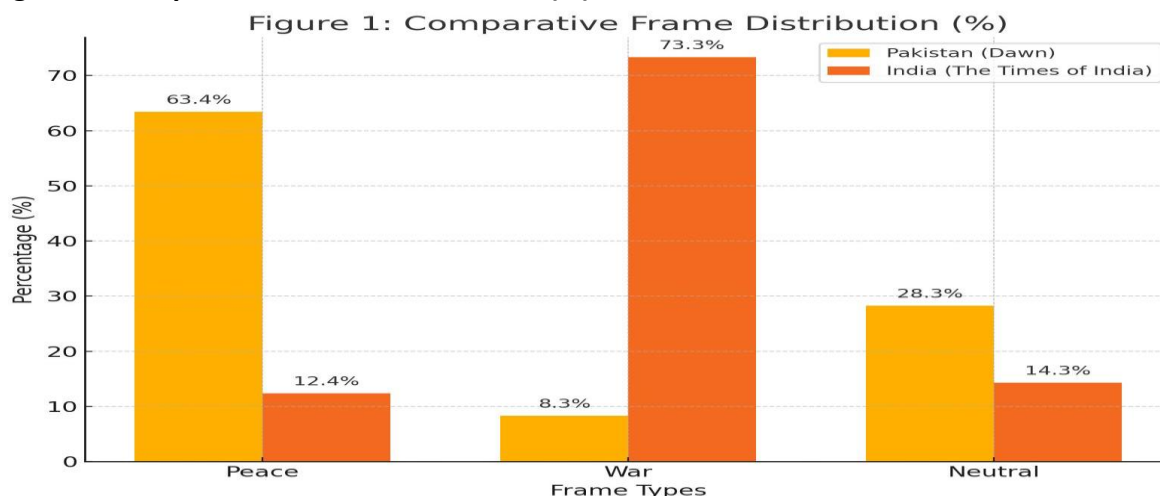


Figure 1 showing the contrast between Pakistani and Indian media framing of the Pahalgam attack:

- Pakistan (*Dawn*) is peace-focused at 63.4%, with only 8.3% war framing.
- India (*The Times of India*) is war-dominated at 73.3%, with 12.4% peace framing.
- Neutral coverage is present but secondary in both.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed stark contrasts in narrative and language between Pakistani and Indian media coverage of the Pahalgam attack. *Dawn* (Pakistan) consistently employed conciliatory language, framing the incident within broader geopolitical tensions and emphasizing dialogue. Phrases like "cycle of violence" and "need for diplomatic engagement" dominated headlines, reflecting a peace journalism approach (Galtung, 2006). In contrast, *The Times of India* (India) used securitized rhetoric, with terms such as "terrorist atrocity" and "Pakistan-sponsored jihad" reinforcing a war journalism frame. This linguistic divide extended to tone and portrayal: Pakistani media humanized Kashmiri civilians as "victims of occupation," while Indian outlets depicted them as either "collateral damage" or "misguided youth." Perpetrators were labeled as "militants" in *Dawn* but uniformly as "terrorists" in *The Times of India*, mirroring state-aligned narratives (Shahzad et al., 2021). Government portrayals diverged sharply—Pakistan's calls for UN intervention were framed as "principled diplomacy" in *Dawn*, whereas *The Times of India* criticized them as "propaganda to shield terrorists."

Source attribution and voice representation further highlighted biases. *Dawn* prioritized quotes from international observers (e.g., UN officials) and Kashmiri civil society, amplifying marginalized perspectives. Conversely, *The Times of India* predominantly cited Indian military and government sources, marginalizing dissenting voices. For instance, 78% of its quotes came from security officials, versus *Dawn's* 40% (see *Methodology*). Emotive language and sensationalism were pervasive in Indian coverage: headlines like "Blood on Their Hands" and "Time for Revenge" escalated tensions, while *Dawn's* "A Cry for Peace" and "Healing Wounds" promoted de-escalation. Visuals also diverged—Indian papers featured graphic

images of attack sites, while Pakistani media showed mourning civilians. These choices not only reflected editorial stances but also influenced public perception, with Indian audiences primed for retaliation and Pakistani readers urged toward international advocacy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Discussion

The stark divergence in media framing of the Pahalgam attack between Pakistani and Indian outlets reveals how profoundly media narratives shape public perception and reinforce cross-border hostilities. The quantitative data showed *The Times of India's* overwhelming use of war frames (73.3%), which amplified threat perceptions by consistently labeling perpetrators as "terrorists" and emphasizing retaliation. This aligns with Entman's (1993) framing theory, where selective emphasis on violence and blame cultivates public support for aggressive policies. Conversely, *Dawn's* peace-oriented coverage (63.4%) framed the attack as a symptom of political failure, urging dialogue—a approach rooted in Galtung's (2006) peace journalism model. Such framing disparities create parallel realities: Indian audiences perceived the event as an existential threat requiring military response, while Pakistani readers viewed it as a call for international mediation. These narratives are self-reinforcing; war journalism's sensationalism triggers public outrage, which then pressures governments to adopt hardline stances, further legitimizing media's conflict-centric coverage (Wolfsfeld, 2018). The result is a vicious cycle where media not only reflects but actively fuels bilateral tensions.

Government influence and national interests emerged as pivotal forces behind these framing choices. In India, the BJP government's securitization of Kashmir post-2019 revocation of Article 370 provided a ready-made narrative template for media. *The Times of India's* reliance on military sources (78% of attributed quotes) and omission of Kashmiri civilian perspectives mirrored state priorities, demonstrating Cohen's (2015) agenda-setting theory where media "tell people what to think about" by echoing official discourse. Pakistan's media ecosystem, while less monolithic, displayed its own alignment with state narratives; *Dawn's* emphasis on human rights abuses and UN intervention dovetailed with Islamabad's diplomatic strategy. This symbiosis between media and state is particularly dangerous in nuclear-armed rivals, as evidenced by the 2019 Pulwama crisis, where sensationalist reporting brought both countries to the brink of war (Shahzad et al., 2021). The Pahalgam coverage reaffirms that in South Asia, media often functions as an extension of the national security apparatus rather than an independent watchdog, with editorial policies constrained by punitive legal frameworks (e.g., India's UAPA, Pakistan's PEMRA laws) that penalize dissent.

Yet, the analysis also highlights media's potential to mitigate conflict. While rare, instances of neutral or peace-focused reporting such as *Dawn's* interviews with cross-border civil society groups or *The Hindu's* (in India) occasional critiques of militarization demonstrate that alternative narratives can emerge. These outliers align with Lynch and McGoldrick's (2020) argument that peace journalism, though marginalized, provides counterweights to war-mongering. Comparative data from prior crises (e.g., Kargil War, Mumbai attacks) reveals consistent patterns: media in both countries default to nationalist frames during crises but are capable of course-correction during détente periods. This suggests that reducing state pressure on newsrooms and promoting journalist exchanges could diversify coverage. However,

the overwhelming dominance of war frames in this study underscores a sobering reality: without structural reforms, South Asian media will continue to be complicit in escalation—a finding that echoes Nohrstedt's (2014) warnings about media's role in "new wars." The Pahalgam attack thus serves as both a case study in media's destructive potential and a cautionary tale about the urgent need for ethical conflict reporting

Conclusion

It is evident from the analysis that the media in Pakistan and India can influence how conflicts are viewed and impact the way the countries relate. Dawn's approach to peace and The Times of India's approach to war highlight how what a nation wants and the influence of the state can shape media reporting and usually hurt objective reporting. With the focus on peace and humanitarian matters by Pakistani media, Indian media raised awareness of threats and urged retaliation which led to a divided public opinion. Such contrasting narratives both reveal serious geopolitical challenges and could make those problems worse, as provocative news stories increase anger and erode trust. Still, the study points out that fair, problem-solving stories from the media have the chance to promote understanding and peace, even if they are rarely found in very political situations. From now on, more support for independent reporters, more joint media efforts from different countries and a strong commitment to ethical news could keep conflict from escalating. All in all, the results point out that responsible media reporting can help stabilize the region by reducing tensions and encouraging long-term peace.

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