

Snowballed Covid-19 Spread and Waned News Coverage in Indian Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the increased spread of COVID-19 virus in India and the space and time allocated by the English national newspapers in the wake of the pandemic. Media plays an indispensable role in society to influence health literacy, and the world media meticulously made COVID-19 the top priority, and the Indian newspapers were no different. The initial months of the virus outbreak, the percentage of coverage of news articles were more than other any other news categories and the same coverage was expected for the later months as well when the number of cases snowballed drastically. But, as the 'newness' about the virus gradually became feeble, the news coverage about COVID-19 also started to lose its vigor. To document and prove this concept, COVID-19 coverage in English national dailies, hardcopies of The Hindu and Times of India, were methodically reviewed from March to August 2020.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, National Dailies in India, space and time analysis, news coverage

INTRODUCTION

In a media-rich environment, the daily newspapers play an imperative role in framing a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to understand how newspapers disseminate and manage information to cater to the news consumption of the readers. The study examines how news coverage slowly started to decrease when the COVID-19 positive cases in India are going high. Since the widespread of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, the media organizations around the globe have risen to its responsible stature and positioned COVID-19 coverage as their foremost agenda. The newness of the virus and its impact on humankind is plausibly the reason for this. But, it is the same agenda that sidelined the COVID-19 coverage when the world learned to live with the virus.

This study will use qualitative content analysis to examine this scenario. For the analysis, the two highest circulated English national newspapers in India (according to Audit Bureau of Circulation), The Hindu and The Times of India have been selected for the period of 01.03.2020 to 31.08.2020.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In terms of COVID-19, the agendas set by the media organizations were in-tune with the actions taken by the world governments. During the initial days of the virus spread in India, the vigilant media including the newspapers covered nothing but COVID-19 – the healthcare aspects, the nature of the virus, treatments, economic impacts, lockdowns, and many more. Wimmer & Dominick (2014) stated that an analysis of relevant media content is necessary to determine the importance of news topics. Many previous researches, mainly through the Agenda-Setting theory & Gate-Keeping theory, have established that media plays an important role in deciding what information the public should know, think about, and act upon.

Though researches to date have not established what other categories of news replaced the COVID-19 news coverage by the end of the study timeline, a good majority of the studies those are available

at the present analysis the ‘frames’ used in the newspaper articles about COVID-19. Thomas et al. (2020) studied how the media places responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia through an analysis of two Australian newspapers. The results showed that the most dominant themes from the study were about how COVID-19 is posed as an imminent threat to the economy and the dramatic increase in virus spread. The study also showed that the number of publications on COVID-19 related news increased consistently in the daily Australian since the country reported its first COVID-19 death on March 1st 2020. “The distinct lateness in publications related to COVID-19 and the lack of blame potentially represents an indication of how the media have interpreted the risk as posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia”.

A study analysed 744 news articles (March 8th to April 4th) on COVID-19 in Bangladeshi newspapers ProthomAlo and The Daily Star established that both national and international news related to the virus were given high preferences in the newspapers during the study period. Later, the newspapers sidelined the representation of the pandemic as more as national economic crisis rather than a health crisis. This clearly showcases the agenda-setting and the gate-keeping method followed by the media organizations. Furthermore, this study also proved that the public became more curious to understand more about the virus and thus has led the coverage of COVID-19 consume much of the news media's attention. (Hoque& Siddique, 2020).

Msughter& Phillips, (2020) in their study indicate that the COVID-19 media narratives tilted more in economic and political outlines. The Nigerian newspapers Daily Trust and Vanguard within the study period (February to May 2020) cased the pandemic more as economic and financial crisis – downplaying the important aspects such as health, safety or quality of life. This implies that the constant reportage of certain aspect of an issue can persuade the media users and their mind can be accustomed to trust the priorities and agenda that the media set. The study thus validate that the media have the potential to downplay the problems while directing the audience attention to specific ideas, issues or individuals.

In their study titled Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage (Hart et al., 2020, p. 685) verified that the newspaper coverage of COVID-19 in US is highly politicized as politicians appear more frequently than the scientists. The study also stated that the preconceptions in newsroom norms and the need to draw audience attention to certain issues can also result in the politicization of content. From the study, it is comprehensible that the approach of the newspapers in the process of selection, editing, and dissemination of COVID-19 related news. Atasoy, I. (2020) conducted a comparative study of the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic on the headlines of German and Spanish newspapers and proved that the headlines of the newspapers depict COVID-19 as a dangerous risk to the public. The study also pointed out that there are many resemblances in the medical manifestations of COVID-19 in newspapers.

Onwe et al. (2020) favours the content analysis of online newspapers’ reportage of COVID-19 in Nigeria as their study finding suggests that the newspapers kept intact its civic duty to inform the public about the prevalence, fatalities and preventive measures against the pandemic. Subsequently, the study then verified the fact that the selected online newspapers’ reportage (February to March 2020) of COVID-19 were carried out in such ways that made the audience nervous even before the eventual outbreak of the pandemic. The study maintained the position that the world is relying on the media for a must-win battle against the pandemic. This connotes higher social responsibility from the media as they frame the messages about COVID-19 pandemic.

The media’s role as fourth pillar has the potential to put off the spread of the pandemic by encouraging good personal hygiene and public healthcare practices. This responsibility has been carried out very well by the media across the globe but later on it is evidently been noticed that the COVID-19 news has been sidelined by the media. According to Cobb and Elder (1971) established that “some controversies or incipient issues come to command the attention and concern of decision makers, while others fail” (p. 905). Media influencers such as the head of the state or the government too can influence the media reportage and content creation. Schwalbe et al. (2015)

established that agenda-driven visual providers can bypass the conventional media gate-checkers. Furthermore, this can be easily proved through space and time analysis of newspapers.

The studies during the initial days of COVID-19 outbreak have verified that though the media organizations around the world have been socially responsible in the portrayal of the pandemic. The same was expected for the later periods as well when the number of cases snowballed drastically. Unfortunately sooner, the politicization of the pandemic incapacitated it as an economical and political crisis rather than a health emergency. This study is trying to prove how the national dailies in India crippled the COVID-19 reportage. Though there are many studies done on how newspapers framed the pandemic, there are no studies done on the space and time consumed by COVID-19 reportage in Indian national dailies (The Hindu and The Times of India – the highest circulated English newspapers in India as per the list of the Audit Bureau of Circulation). This study will further prove what all ‘categories’ of news replaced the COVID-19 as compared to the initial period of the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study finds out whether there is a decrease in the news coverage about COVID-19 in newspapers in India when the country's COVID-19 graph is rising steeply. A content analysis of two major national English dailies for six months i.e 01.03.2020 to 31.08.2020 is conducted. The two national dailies selected for the study are The Hindu and The Times of India respectively. The study finds out the ‘other categories’ of news which were initially ignored during the first few months of COVID-19 and then eventually became more noticeable and important than the pandemic. To get an explanation about the decreased news coverage on COVID-19 in newspapers in India, it is necessary to find answers on

RQ1- There is a noticeable decrease in the amount of news coverage on COVID-19 in the newspapers when there is an increase in the virus spread. What could be the theoretical explanation?

RQ2- Why Indian newspapers cover less COVID-19 news as the virus spread intensified? What are the other categories of news which seized the space?

Objectives of the study: 1) To find out changes in the ‘news prominence’ graph in national dailies when covid-19 spread increased India. 2) To find out the theoretical explanation of decreasing ‘news’ prominence of a pandemic over time. 3) To find out the other categories of news those are more important than the pandemic.

Key concepts:

Pandemic: An epidemic or a disease that spreads through a wide geographic area distressing an exceptionally high fraction of the populace.

COVID-19: A contagious virus belonging to the coronavirus family or SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2). This new strain of the virus was unknown until its outbreak in China's Wuhan city in December 2019. It soon spread to throughout the world causing 1,248,794 deaths and 49,669,172 positive cases as of 7th October 2020. COVID-19 is contagious and can spread from person to person through small droplets of bodily fluids when a person exhales, cough, or sneeze during the incubation period. The symptoms can vary from person to person – from mild fever and tiredness to acute respiratory issues that are fatal and can result in death. Some infected persons are asymptomatic and data reveals that about 80% get cured without being administered any medical treatments. On 11th March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Global Pandemic.

Incubation period: The timeline between contracting the virus and beginning to have symptoms of the disease. The estimated incubation period for COVID-19 is from 1-14 days.

Testing: The persons showing symptoms of COVID-19 and those persons who have had close contact with a confirmed positive COVID-19 person for a minimum of 15 minutes within 6 feet personal distance. The persons who want to get a test done through government healthcare facilities or private testing labs. There are diagnostic tests (mainly RT-PCR, Antigen) that detect active coronavirus infection and antibody or blood test which look for evidence if a person was infected.

Virus spread: A disease that spread from person to person, with the reference to COVID-19, the spread has become uncontrollable.

National Daily: a newspaper/daily that is circulated nationally i.e across all the Indian states and the union territories.

News coverage: reporting, treatment, and exposure of news or a happening which takes place in a particular place during a certain timeframe.

News article: any media report that is printed and published in a newspaper/magazine.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The fulcrum of this study is that from March 1st to March 15th the total number of COVID-19 officially confirmed positive cases in India was 100 which snowballed to 78761 officially confirmed positive cases by August and how the media industry responded to the content needs during the study period. These scenarios are anchored on media theories that rely on ‘media effects’ and ‘organizational communication’, and ‘consumer behavior’. The focus of this study will be on ‘Agenda-Setting Theory’ and ‘Gate-Keeping Theory’.

1) **The Agenda-Setting Theory:** ‘New is news’ – this concept of freshness is what is driving the news media. Every media organization around the globe set their organizational agenda in such a manner that individuality and novelty are the key aspects in selecting what to include or not as a news article. The agenda-setting theory put forth by McCombs and Shaw (1973) is the perfect corroboration of how COVID-19 reports are filtered and sidelined as the issue lost its prominence over time; in essence, here the media is trying to place the agenda (awareness and priorities) for the public debate. James W. Dearing & Everett M. Rogers (1996) state agenda-setting is to measure how the salience of an issue changes, and why this change occurs. In conclusion, the theoretical agenda-setting scenario connected to the study is propounded by Bernard Cohen (1963) as “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

2) **The Gate-keeping Theory:** Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan city came to light, the global media has given utmost priority towards disseminating information regarding the virus – the Indian media was not any different. But, as the world learned to live alongside the virus, the news also started to get filtered at the ‘gates’. The Gate-keeping theory is about how media regulate the flow of information. The concept revolves around the idea that there are gatekeepers (in journalist, editors or management) that makes the decision along the information channels and decides whether the information should be allowed to flow or be stopped.

Shoemaker & Reese, (1991) explored the thought that the routine practices of the media also act as a ‘gate’, “the routines of communication work level focused on decisions that are made according to a patterned and repeated practice and form that media workers use to do their job. Routines form a set of rules that ensures the media system will respond in predictable ways and cannot be easily violated”.

Methods: This study will use Quantitative Content Analysis to answer RQ1 and RQ2. The national dailies The Hindu and The Times of India were purposively selected. The selection was based on the circulation report of ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation) and ease of availability.

I. Sampling technique: The study uses purposive sampling to select the national dailies in India from ABC’s most circulated English dailies in the country. According to

IrengbamArun (2012), studies of particular types of publications or particular times may be of interest because these publications were important or the time played an important role. The study then moves on to using systematic sampling to gather data to scrutinize newspapers for the selected time frame where every n^{th} day's newspaper (multiples of 5) is selected as a sample unit i.e 1^{st} , 5^{th} , 10^{th} , 15^{th} , 20^{th} , 25^{th} & 30^{th} day of every month of the sampling frame.

- II. Data collection, interpretation, and analysis methods:** The English national dailies, The Hindu and The Times of India, from 01.03.2020 to 31.08.2020 were collected from the University Library, SreeSankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady. Each article in the National pages of the sample units was measured, and tabulations were made according to the categories of the news segments (i.e COVID-19, politics, entertainment, sports, crime, etc.) to find out the percentage of space allocated. These percentages of space allotted was compared through graphical chart representation using Microsoft excel.

FINDINGS

The first confirmed positive case of COVID-19 in India was reported in Kerala on January 27th 2020. The government was successful in quarantining and contact tracing. Since then till the month of March there weren't any upsurge in the positive cases. But, slowly the cases started to rise in the country from mid march. The figure 1.1 shows the steady increases of the confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 in the country from March 1st 2020 to 31st August 2020. Figure 2.1 shows the space and time analysis of news coverage of The Hindu newspaper from March 2020 to August 2020. Figure 2.2 shows the space and time analysis of news coverage of The Times of India newspaper from March 2020 to August 2020.

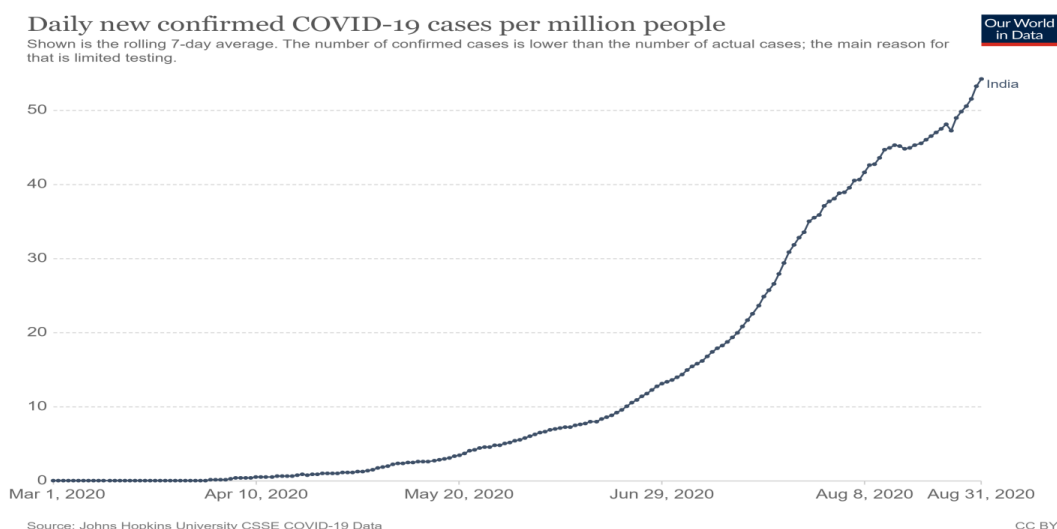


Figure 1.1 shows the daily COVID-19 positive cases in India from 01-03-2020 to 31-08-2020

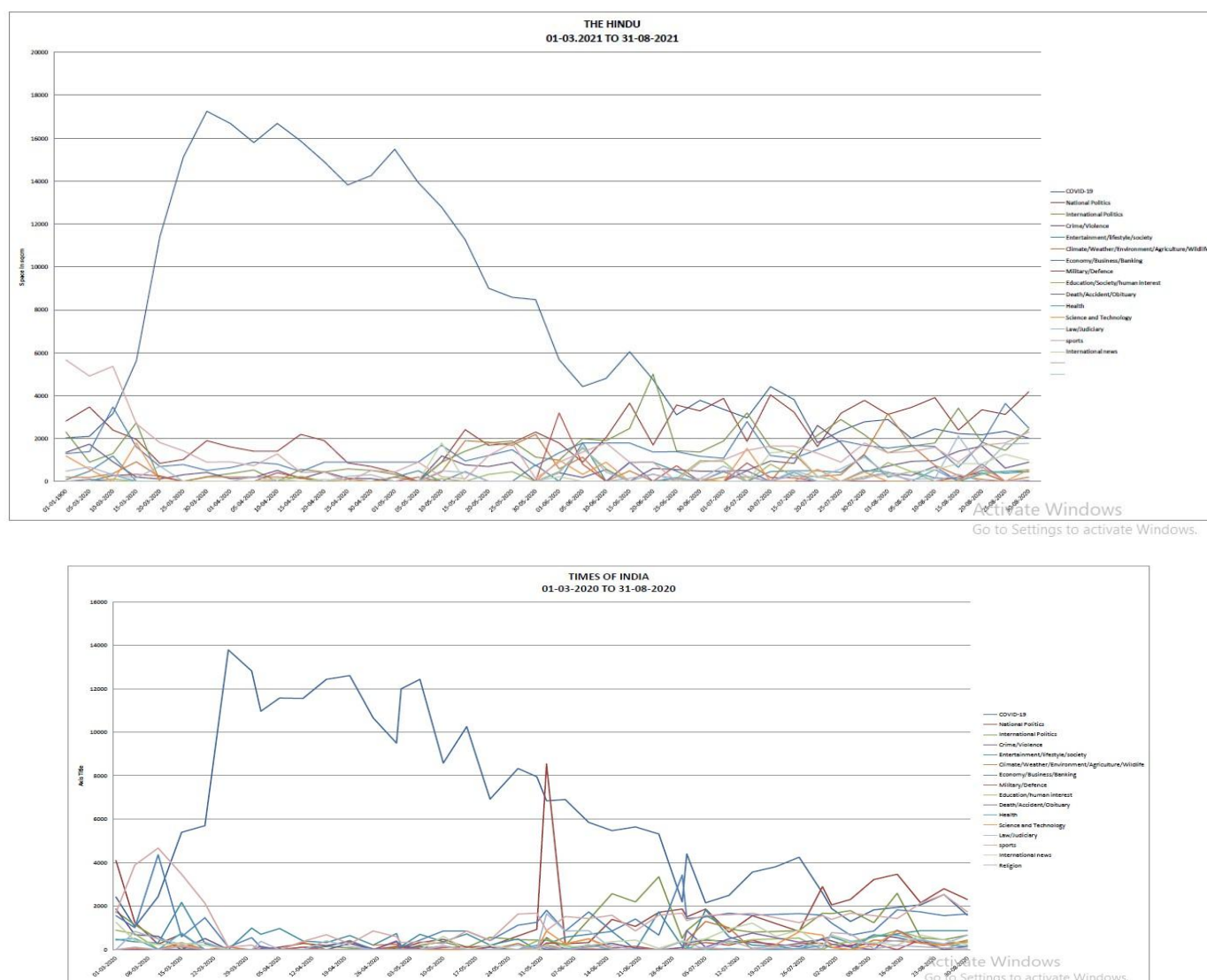


Figure 2.1 shows the space and time analysis of the Hindu newspaper from 01-03-2020 to 31-08-2020

From figure 2.1 and figure 2.2, it is recorded that, among the two dailies, The Times of India had more covid-19 related news in the initial three months of the study than The Hindu. Whereas, compared to The Hindu, a steep fall in the covid-19 coverage has been noted in The Times of India during the month of July. It is also noted that both the dailies have covered more covid-19 news and have sidelined the other categories in the first three months of the selected study duration. Whereas, the newspapers have slowly and steadily started to fill-in more regular news categories after six months of the outbreak as “anything new is news”, and covid-19 has slowly become a non-priority. The two graphs shows that during July and August, compared to the initial months of the study, the proportion of dofferent categories have become more or less like pre covid days.

The categories which were dropped-off during the month of March (after 20th), April, and May were politics, religion, crime/violence, other health related news, entertainment, sports, and environment. The political news related to covid-19 was only been covered by both the newspapers, during the initial months of this study.

Additional findings:

Both the newspapers have allocated pages for COVID-19 news. In TOI – state level there are pages

<http://annalsofrscb.ro>

under the title 'virus watch' while The Hindu included the COVID-19 news in pages titled 'COVID-19'.

The news related to virus spread, incubation, testing, quarantine were the most popular themes in covid-19 news articles in the month of March, April, May, June whereas, in August the more prominent theme was COVID-19 impact on economy, policies, vaccine etc.

The advertisements in the selected sample units were also measure and analysed, but this figured were excluded from the graphical representation. There was a noticeable decrease in the advertisements during the April when there was a complete lockdown in India.

CONCLUSION

The study fines out that there is a perceptible decrease in news coverage about COVID-19 in the national pages of the dailies The Hindu and Times of India when the number COVID-19 spread in the India was skyrocketing. The covid-19 news and have sidelined the other categories in the first three months of the selected study duration. The categories which were dropped-off during the month of March (after 20th), April, and May were politics, religion, crime/violence, other health related news, entertainment, sports, and environment. The study has proven that the newspapers gradually came back to pre-covid days as regular news categories were again incorporated from the month of July. The news prominence depends on the priority and here, the 'new is news' concept was lost in time.

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