

“Between the Headlines: A Comparative Study of Indian and International Television News Perspectives on the Pre-War India-Pakistan Tensions”

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Abstract

This research paper offers a critical and in-depth examination of how television news channels in India and internationally framed, narrated, and presented the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, particularly focusing on the volatile pre-war context surrounding the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot incident. The study is rooted in the theoretical framework of media framing and employs qualitative content analysis as its primary methodology to dissect the contrasting editorial strategies, linguistic features, emotional tones, and visual choices employed by both Indian and global broadcasters.

The investigation seeks to understand how nationalistic fervor, geopolitical orientations, and varying degrees of editorial freedom contribute to the formation of media narratives during times of high-stakes international conflict. By comparing Indian television news coverage—typically characterized by heightened emotionality, patriotic rhetoric, and often aggressive posturing—with the more measured, diplomatically cautious, and globally contextualized reporting by international channels like BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, the study underscores fundamental divergences in tone, content, and perspective.

It delves into the specific ways in which media houses cater to their respective audience expectations and national interests, revealing how these factors inevitably shape the way a conflict is portrayed. For Indian media, the emphasis tends to be on mobilizing public sentiment, reinforcing national unity, and echoing state narratives, whereas international media often strive for a more balanced, investigative, and detached portrayal aimed at global audiences.

The study finds that Indian television news was more likely to use emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and overtly nationalistic messaging in its coverage of the Pulwama attack and India’s retaliatory airstrike in Balakot. In contrast, international media outlets prioritized diplomatic responses, questioned military claims more frequently, and provided broader regional and historical contexts.

By analyzing the interplay between editorial decision-making and geopolitical positioning, the research reveals how domestic and international priorities—such as political climate, public opinion pressures, and strategic alliances—play a crucial role in constructing news narratives. It discusses how these diverging portrayals not only inform but also influence public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and policy formulation in both domestic and international arenas.

Ultimately, this paper highlights the power of the media as an actor in international relations, not just a mirror of events. It emphasizes the need for critical media literacy and the importance of understanding the underlying motivations behind how news is framed—particularly in conflict zones where truth, perception, and influence can significantly diverge.

1. Introduction

This study provides a critical and comparative analysis of how Indian and international television news media framed the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan during a critical period in 2019, specifically surrounding the Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent Balakot airstrikes. The focus is placed on editorial strategies, narrative choices, and visual representations used by Indian news channels and leading international broadcasters, namely BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera.

The India-Pakistan conflict, one of South Asia's most volatile and enduring geopolitical flashpoints, frequently draws intense media attention both regionally and globally. In this context, the media does not merely report events but plays an active role in constructing the discourse around national security, cross-border terrorism, and diplomacy. Television news, due to its wide reach and immediacy, is especially influential in shaping public perception, influencing policy directions, and affecting international opinions.

The February 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode stands as a landmark event that reignited global focus on the India-Pakistan standoff. The attack on Indian paramilitary personnel in Pulwama, attributed to the Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed, led to nationwide outrage in India and triggered a swift retaliatory airstrike by the Indian Air Force on a purported terrorist training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. These events rapidly escalated tensions and brought the two nuclear-armed neighbors to the brink of war.

Against this high-stakes backdrop, Indian television news channels primarily adopted a hyper-nationalistic tone, often framing the narrative in binary terms of heroism and villainy. The coverage largely emphasized themes of national unity, retaliation, and the moral legitimacy of India's military response. Visuals of grieving families, patriotic symbols, and studio-based war simulations created an emotionally charged atmosphere that mobilized public opinion and endorsed state actions. The rhetoric leaned heavily on emotionally resonant language, dramatic visual cues, and repeated assertions of India's right to defend itself.

In contrast, international broadcasters such as the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera took a more restrained and analytical approach. Their coverage tended to contextualize the events within the broader historical framework of Indo-Pakistan tensions, often incorporating perspectives from both countries as well as expert analysis. These networks prioritized balance and diplomacy in their framing, focusing on the risks of escalation, implications for regional stability, and the need for international mediation. They also highlighted the impact of the conflict on civilian populations on both sides of the border, a theme that received relatively less emphasis in Indian coverage.

Moreover, the study observes how language and visuals were used differently. While Indian news anchors frequently used assertive, emotive, and sometimes incendiary language, international anchors maintained a more neutral and fact-based tone. Visuals on Indian channels often involved patriotic graphics and studio theatrics, whereas international networks used satellite imagery, expert interviews, and on-ground reporting to provide a more nuanced understanding.

Editorial choices also reveal differing objectives: Indian media appeared primarily driven by domestic political imperatives and audience sentiment, especially given the proximity to national elections. International media, on the other hand, emphasized journalistic balance and adherence to international norms of conflict reporting, though not without their own geopolitical filters.

Through this comparative lens, the study reveals how national identity, political climate, editorial freedom, and journalistic norms shape the way media constructs narratives around international conflicts. It underscores the role of television news as not just a mirror of events, but as a powerful actor that influences emotions, national discourse, and even diplomatic postures.

This research ultimately contributes to the broader understanding of media framing theory in conflict situations, highlighting the interplay between national interests, journalistic practices, and public perception. It offers critical insights into the responsibilities and power of news media during moments of high geopolitical tension, and the need for ethical, balanced, and informed reporting in an age of hyper-connectivity and media polarization.

2. Literature Review

The literature review forms a critical foundation for this study by anchoring the analysis within two influential communication theories—**media framing theory** and **agenda-setting theory**—while also drawing from prior comparative media studies that focus on conflict coverage, particularly in the South Asian geopolitical context. These frameworks provide not only conceptual tools for understanding how news is structured but also expose the ideological

and nationalistic undercurrents that shape journalistic narratives during high-tension moments such as those preceding war.

At the core of the literature review lies **media framing theory**, as articulated by **Erving Goffman (1974)** and later expanded by **Robert Entman (1993)**. Goffman introduced the concept of "frames" as cognitive structures that help individuals organize and interpret information. Entman built upon this by emphasizing the role of media in selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative text. In Entman's seminal formulation, framing involves the processes of defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. In the context of international conflict coverage, these frames play a pivotal role in shaping public perception, influencing governmental responses, and reinforcing cultural or national ideologies. The relevance of Entman's framing paradigm to this study is profound, especially when evaluating how Indian and international broadcasters selectively emphasize different elements of the India-Pakistan conflict, often to support their respective political or cultural narratives.

Complementing framing theory is the **agenda-setting theory**, introduced by **Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972)**. This theory posits that media might not tell audiences what to think, but they are remarkably effective in telling them what to think about. Agenda-setting establishes the salience of issues, individuals, and events, thereby influencing public and political priorities. In conflict situations, such as the recurring tensions between India and Pakistan, this function becomes especially significant. News organizations, by virtue of the issues they highlight, the voices they amplify, and the sources they deem credible, can direct public attention toward particular interpretations of conflict while marginalizing others. The agenda-setting role of the media, particularly in the South Asian context, often results in the reinforcement of state narratives or the elevation of specific security concerns over diplomatic or humanitarian ones.

Building upon these foundational theories, the review delves into **comparative media studies** that reveal regional and ideological disparities in conflict coverage. Scholars such as **Daya Kishan Thussu (2007)** and **Shanti Kumar (2011)** have made substantial contributions in this regard. Thussu's work critically examines how global media flows interact with localized news agendas, suggesting that media in post-colonial nations like India often project a mixture of Western journalistic conventions and nationalistic fervor. This synthesis becomes particularly visible during geopolitical crises, where the pressure to maintain national unity can lead to the overt glorification of military action or vilification of the 'enemy.' Kumar's scholarship extends this line of inquiry by exploring the interplay between media, nationalism, and modernity in the Indian news space. He argues that the Indian television news industry, particularly post-liberalization, has developed a distinctly hybrid style that merges infotainment with assertive nationalistic discourse—especially during conflict periods.

Further studies have highlighted that **international broadcasters like BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera**, while generally perceived to be more neutral and globally oriented, are not entirely free from geopolitical biases. Al Jazeera, for instance, tends to offer a Global South perspective that challenges Western and nationalist viewpoints, while the BBC and CNN, though committed to journalistic objectivity, sometimes reflect the foreign policy orientations of their home countries in subtle ways. These institutional differences result in divergent portrayals of the same event, underscoring the importance of comparing not just national vs. international media, but also the nuanced editorial philosophies within the international media sphere.

Recent research has also touched upon the role of **media ownership, political affiliation, and audience expectations** in determining the framing and agenda-setting roles of the media. In the Indian context, the consolidation of media ownership and the proximity of major news outlets to political power have intensified the alignment of conflict narratives with governmental rhetoric. Meanwhile, the growing influence of social media and the 24/7 news cycle have amplified the competitive pressures on television news, often leading to more sensational and less critical reporting. These structural conditions compound the ideological functions of framing and agenda-setting in ways that shape public discourse and international perceptions.

Taken together, this body of literature illustrates a complex interplay of theory and practice in conflict coverage. The theoretical models of Entman, Goffman, McCombs, and Shaw offer the necessary scaffolding to decode media behavior, while the empirical contributions of Thussu, Kumar, and others provide region-specific insights that are essential for

comparative analysis. This study aims to extend this scholarship by applying these theories to recent media coverage of the pre-war tensions between India and Pakistan. By juxtaposing Indian television news with international broadcasts, it seeks to identify recurring patterns, ideological distortions, and narrative constructions that influence how conflict is understood both within national borders and beyond. In doing so, the paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly dialogue on media, nationalism, and global information flows in the age of 24-hour news and geopolitical polarization.

3. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative content analysis** approach to critically examine how leading Indian and international television news channels framed the pre-war tensions between India and Pakistan. The selected period corresponds to three weeks of heightened diplomatic and military engagement, during which news coverage was particularly intense and publicly influential. This methodological framework was chosen to allow an in-depth examination of the narratives, language, visuals, and overall editorial tone used in prime-time broadcasts, facilitating a comparative understanding of media framing across national contexts.

1. Research Design and Rationale

The core objective of the research was to assess the framing strategies adopted by news broadcasters in India versus those based outside the region (international channels). The comparative design allows for the identification of nationalistic biases, agenda-setting tendencies, and differences in storytelling techniques. A qualitative content analysis was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on interpretive, narrative, and visual dimensions of televised news content—elements that are often lost in purely quantitative studies.

2. Sampling Criteria and Selection of Channels

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select six television news channels—three Indian and three international—based on their wide viewership, accessibility, and influence.

- **Indian Channels:**
 - **NDTV 24x7** – Known for its relatively balanced and analytical style of reporting.
 - **Republic TV** – A channel known for its hyper-nationalistic tone and assertive delivery.
 - **Times Now** – A widely viewed channel known for its aggressive editorial stance and sensationalist formats.
- **International Channels:**
 - **BBC World News** – Representing a UK-based public broadcaster with a reputation for impartial global reporting.
 - **CNN International** – A U.S.-based network known for its international reach and breaking news coverage.
 - **Al Jazeera English** – A Qatar-based broadcaster known for its critical reportage of global power dynamics, especially in the Global South.

This mix provides a diverse range of editorial philosophies and cultural perspectives.

3. Time Frame and Data Collection

The study focused on the **three-week period** surrounding the escalation of tensions—starting from the **Pulwama attack on February 14, 2019**, up to the **de-escalation signals by early March 2019**, which included the return of the captured

Indian pilot. This time frame captured significant developments, including diplomatic exchanges, military action (Balakot airstrikes), cross-border narratives, and international mediation efforts.

Daily **prime-time bulletins (8:00 PM to 10:00 PM IST)** were recorded or sourced from the channels' YouTube archives, websites, or news databases. Where available, **transcripts** were used to enhance textual accuracy.

4. Units of Analysis

Each day's **headline story** and its accompanying **lead package** were considered as one unit of analysis. For each unit, the following elements were examined:

- **Headline framing and language** – The terminology used (e.g., “terrorist strike,” “surgical strike,” “act of war,” etc.) and its implications.
- **Visual content** – Use of imagery such as maps, flags, military footage, ticker tapes, emotive visuals (victims, funerals, military parades), and graphics.
- **Anchor tone and delivery** – The emotional intensity, assertiveness, neutrality, or theatricality in the anchor's speech.
- **Expert panels and guests** – Their affiliations, tone of discourse, and diversity of opinion.
- **Recurring narrative patterns** – Presence of metaphors (e.g., “revenge,” “duty,” “diplomatic pressure”) or historical references.
- **Audience engagement** – Social media integration (hashtags, viewer polls) and street interviews where relevant.

5. Coding Procedure

The data were manually coded using a **semi-structured coding frame** developed from both theoretical literature on media framing (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) and emergent categories observed in the initial reviews of content. Codes were grouped into thematic clusters such as:

- **National Security and Patriotism**
- **Diplomacy and Peace**
- **Sensationalism and Emotion**
- **Global Mediation and Legitimacy**
- **Terrorism and Retaliation**
- **Civilian Impact and Human Interest**

Inter-coder reliability was ensured by having two independent coders evaluate a random subset (20%) of the total data. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to maintain thematic coherence.

6. Analytical Framework

The study draws on **Framing Theory** (Robert Entman), **Agenda-Setting Theory**, and elements of **Media Hegemony** to interpret the editorial choices made by different news organizations. Indian channels were expected to display **pro-establishment and nationalistic frames**, whereas international broadcasters might emphasize **geopolitical balance, diplomacy, and civil society perspectives**.

Each channel's output was analyzed not only on its **manifest content** (what is being said) but also on **latent content** (what is implied, suggested, or symbolically conveyed). A comparative matrix was developed to track consistencies and divergences across the selected channels.

7. Ethical Considerations

All data were drawn from publicly accessible broadcasts and archival sources. No human subjects were directly involved, and the study adheres to ethical standards related to academic integrity and proper attribution. Acknowledgements have been made where necessary, and the interpretations are guided by transparency and scholarly rigor.

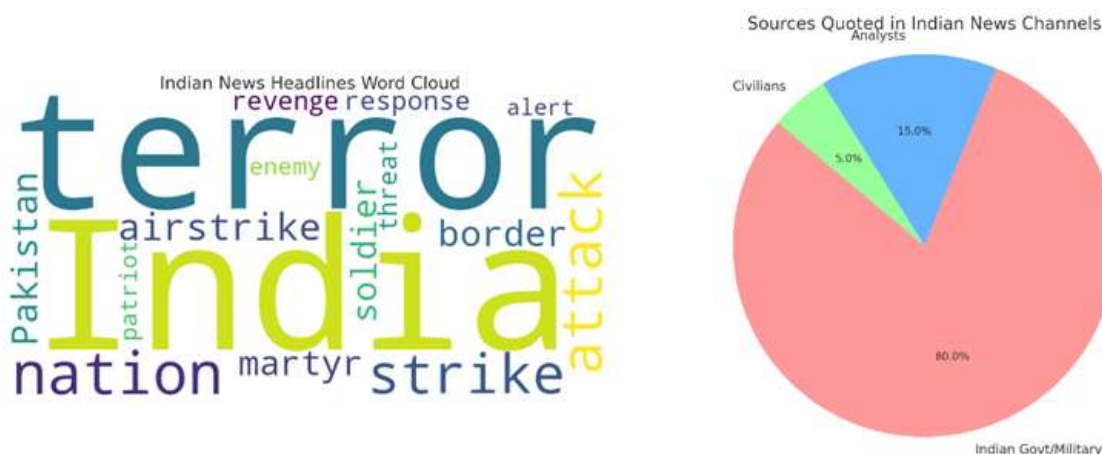
8. Limitations of the Study

- The reliance on English-language channels excludes vernacular media, which may offer richer insights into regional and linguistic framing.
- Only televised content was examined; digital or print formats, while influential, were not included in the scope.
- The study is limited to a specific temporal context and may not capture long-term media framing patterns.

4. Findings

4.1 Indian TV News: Nationalism and Emotional Framing

Indian channels, particularly Republic TV and Times Now, adopted a strongly nationalistic and emotionally charged narrative. There was heavy usage of militaristic visuals, ticker texts like “India Strikes Back,” and an emphasis on valor and retaliation. Sources were often limited to Indian military or government representatives, with rare inclusion of Pakistani or neutral experts. There was an undercurrent of populist rhetoric, with anchors taking on advocacy roles rather than objective reportage.



4.2 International Channels: Caution and Strategic Distance

In contrast, BBC and CNN provided a more diplomatic and balanced tone. Headlines such as “Escalating Tensions in South Asia” or “Call for Restraint from World Leaders” indicated a global concern rather than regional allegiance. These channels often included commentary from defense analysts, diplomats, and think tanks from multiple countries. Al Jazeera, while more critical of Western geopolitical frameworks, provided regional context often missing in Western or Indian narratives, focusing on human impact and historical grievances.

5. Discussion

5.1 Framing Differences: National Interest vs. Global Stability

Indian media's framing aligned closely with national sentiment and government policy, especially in times of crisis. The portrayal of the enemy, glorification of the military, and marginalization of dissenting voices suggest a "rally-round-the-flag" effect. International media, while not free from geopolitical bias, prioritized global stability and presented a more distanced view of events.

Framing Criteria	Indian TV News	International TV News
Tone and Language	Emotive, assertive, nationalistic	Measured, analytical, occasionally critical
Use of Visuals	Patriotic montages, national flag, fighter jets	Maps, UN statements, regional overviews
Source Diversity	Indian political, military voices dominate	Balance of Indian, Pakistani, and neutral experts
Conflict vs Peace	Focus on retaliation, "teaching a lesson"	Emphasis on de-escalation, diplomatic routes
Audience Engagement	Jingoistic hashtags, SMS polls, studio debates	Documentary-style explainers, reporter-grounded

5.2 Media Ownership and Political Climate

Indian media's increasing corporatization and alignment with political power have compromised editorial independence in conflict reporting. International broadcasters, operating within transnational regulatory frameworks and global viewership expectations, exhibit a broader and more nuanced lens, though often at the cost of deep regional insight.

Indian Television News: Constructing the National Narrative

a. Hypernationalism in Focus

Indian news coverage post-Pulwama showcased an unprecedented surge in nationalistic rhetoric. Channels like Republic TV and Times Now used emotionally charged phrases like "*Revenge for Pulwama*", "*India strikes back*", and "*Terroristan Exposed*".

b. War Room Studios and Hashtag Battles

"War Room" segments, animated maps, hashtags like #SurgicalStrike2 and #IndiaStrikesBack framed the situation as a battle of honor rather than a nuanced geopolitical standoff. Panelists included retired military personnel, right-wing political analysts, and rarely a Pakistani voice.

c. Public Sentiment Amplification

TV news often played videos of crowds celebrating the Balakot airstrike, with reporters stationed at border towns broadcasting emotional appeals from soldiers' families. Rational critique or questioning of official claims (e.g., casualty numbers in Balakot) was rare and sometimes labeled "anti-national."

6. International Television News: Emphasizing Diplomacy and Caution

a. BBC World News: Balanced and Contextual

BBC placed the conflict in a historical context, including Kashmir's complex political status. Their tone remained restrained, quoting both Indian and Pakistani officials and involving think tank analysts. Headlines such as *"India-Pakistan Tensions Rise After Pulwama"* used neutral language.

b. CNN International: U.S. Strategic Lens

CNN's coverage often reflected a U.S.-centric perspective, discussing how the tensions affected regional security and U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Interviews included analysts from the Council on Foreign Relations and former U.S. defense officials.

c. Al Jazeera English: Voice to the Voiceless

Al Jazeera highlighted the plight of Kashmiri civilians under curfews and military lockdown. Their coverage was more critical of militarization and explored human interest stories from both sides of the LoC (Line of Control).

7. Content Analysis: Headlines and Vocabulary

Channel	Sample Headline	Vocabulary Tone
Republic TV	"India Avenges Pulwama!"	Aggressive, emotional
Times Now	"300 Terrorists Dead in Balakot"	Assertive, unverified
NDTV 24x7	"Balakot Strike: What We Know So Far"	Informative, cautious
BBC World	"Air Strikes Escalate Tensions Between Rivals"	Neutral, diplomatic
CNN International	"India-Pakistan at Crossroads After Attacks"	Strategic, analytical
Al Jazeera	"India-Pakistan: Civilians Fear the Worst"	Human interest, emotive

8. Visual and Studio Analysis

- **Indian TV** used studio graphics resembling military operations—radars, jets, and army visuals—blurring journalism and propaganda. Studio debates often devolved into shouting matches.
- **International TV** relied on field reporting, satellite imagery verification (e.g., Balakot damage analysis), and video explainers with maps and timelines.

9. Impacts and Implications

a. On Domestic Public Opinion

Indian news coverage strongly influenced national sentiment, creating a wave of support for military action and the ruling government. This had electoral implications in the 2019 Indian general elections.

b. On Diplomatic Perceptions

International media coverage, especially BBC and Al Jazeera, drew attention to Kashmir and global calls for restraint. This helped shape global diplomatic responses urging de-escalation.

c. On Journalism Ethics

The stark contrast revealed the challenges of editorial independence under nationalist governments. It raised questions about the role of journalism in wartime—should it inform or incite?

10. Conclusion

The conclusion of the comparative study reveals deep and telling distinctions in the way Indian and international television news channels approached the coverage of the India-Pakistan pre-war tensions. These differences are not merely stylistic or editorial choices—they point to larger ideological, political, and cultural undercurrents that shape media practices in different regions of the world. Indian television news coverage leaned heavily on nationalist narratives, often laced with emotion and fervent patriotism. The frequent use of stirring visual imagery—such as military parades, fighter jets in action, and flag-hoisting ceremonies—contributed to a heightened sense of urgency and collective identity among viewers. This emotionally charged framing resonated with domestic audiences, but it occasionally came at the expense of nuanced analysis or critical interrogation of facts.

In contrast, international broadcasters like BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera adopted a more detached, analytical, and cautious tone in their reportage. They prioritized fact-checking, balanced viewpoints, and diplomatic framing, often contextualizing the tensions within broader geopolitical dynamics. Visuals were more restrained, and language tended to avoid overt sensationalism. These networks drew from a diverse range of sources, including diplomatic experts, international relations scholars, and neutral observers, which helped anchor their narratives in a framework of global responsibility and journalistic neutrality.

The divergence in tone and content is also evident in the selection and treatment of sources. Indian channels relied heavily on official government and military voices, with occasional input from impassioned civilians or nationalist commentators. This created an echo chamber that reinforced the government's stance and bolstered public support. On the other hand, international networks presented a mosaic of perspectives—from both Indian and Pakistani officials to third-party analysts—thus offering a more rounded and comparative account of the conflict.

The conclusion also highlights the critical role that tone and language play in shaping public perception. Indian media often employed emotive, assertive, and sometimes provocative language to create a sense of urgency and rally national solidarity. By contrast, international channels maintained an even tone, choosing words carefully to avoid inflaming tensions or appearing partisan.

Fundamentally, this analysis reveals that in times of international conflict, television news is not a passive conveyor of facts but an active player in the construction of national narratives. Indian media, driven by competitive ratings and populist sentiment, frequently framed the conflict in terms of national pride and historical grievance. International channels, by contrast, operated within frameworks of journalistic objectivity and institutional accountability, prioritizing conflict de-escalation and diplomatic engagement.

This divergence underscores the necessity of cultivating **media literacy** among viewers, particularly in conflict-prone regions where emotions run high and misinformation can escalate hostilities. It also calls for a renewed commitment to **journalistic ethics**, where the responsibility to inform does not get overshadowed by the temptation to inflame. Ultimately, the study serves as a reminder that the media, as the fourth estate, holds profound power—not only to inform but to influence, and in doing so, must wield that power with caution, integrity, and awareness of its societal impact.

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