



# The Media Coverage of Pulwama Attack: An Analysis of leading Indian Newspapers

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## **Abstract**

*The paper lays bare the discourse in Indian media post Pulwama attack and the role of media in sensationalizing the whole crisis in the aftermath of the attack. The media coverage of the crisis proved a benchmark in shaping a nationwide ideology that brought two nuclear countries – India and Pakistan – on the brink of a war. The relentless news coverage by Indian media brought India in a state of panic and hysteria. The analysis of news coverage of Pulwama-like crisis becomes a yardstick to understand the role of media in the dissemination of hyperbolic narratives of war. By analyzing the content of leading Indian newspapers, this work provides a tangible proof of how media turns negligent in war-like situation in the name of national security.*

**Keywords:***Democracy, Media, Newspapers, Pulwama Attack, Security, Sensationalism.*

## **Introduction**

### 1.1 Media and Democracy

Media is the fourth pillar of democracy. In thriving democracies like India, media has gained a lot of momentum in last few decades. The journey of media in India began with the publication of Bengal Gazette during British rule in 1780. Three centuries later, thousands of newspapers and news channels have filled Indian mediascape with 24x7 news coverage of politics, entertainment, sports, etc. The uninterrupted dissemination of information and rallying behind national governments during violent situations has defined Indian media's image over the years. It plays a vital role in shaping the public opinion regarding issues of national importance. Media plays a crucial role in a diverse country like India where governance faces roadblocks on day-to-day basis. It acts as a carrier for government in its delivery of governance in the far and wide of the country.



Every media outlet in the world has a work and a set strategy, principles that govern its working and smooth mechanism. The information outreach through mass media brought the entire world together.

India, being a democratic nation, recognizes the right to speak freely without any restriction, which in turns gives media the freedom of speech. The free speech culture makes citizen participation in democracy possible. Democracy is a form of government where decentralization of powers gives citizens (including media) a right to make opinion of any happenings in their country.

## **The Attack**

On February 14, 2019, a car bomb killed at least 49 paramilitary personnel belonging to India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir [Malik, 2019, [1]]. A banned militant outfit, Jaish-e-Mohammad, with the help of a local suicide bomber carried out the attack on the convoy of the paramilitary forces plying on the highway. This was the most deadly attack on Indian forces in Kashmir with the number of casualties – both fatal and non-fatal – crossing over 120 mark.

A local resident, Adil Ahmad Dar, in his 20s, rammed his explosive-laden car in the middle of the convoy. Later, Dar's father blamed his son's harassment at the hands of government forces for taking such an extreme step (Fayaz, 2019,[2]). Immediately after the attack, a short video was released by Jaish-e-Mohammad claiming the responsibility of the attack.

## **Pulwama bombing as a Media Event**

The coverage of Pulwama attack by the huge bandwagon of news channels in India was intense and unstoppable. Every news channel with multiple correspondents – stationed thousands of miles away from the bombing site – and experts beamed “exclusive” footage of bombing site uninterruptedly. Emotionally-charged anchors and experts yelled at the top of their voices, calling for revenge.

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry of India issued advisory to private news channels to adhere to the Programming and Advertising Code as prescribed in the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. The order cautioned against content which was had the potential to incite violence or contained anything against maintenance of law and order or which promoted anti-national attitudes and/or anything affecting the integrity of India. The uninterruptedly emotional outpouring by TV anchors, calling for revenge, has led to a social problem that needs immediate attention (Mahaprashasta, 2019,[3]).



## Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is the Content analysis of four leading English language news dailies of India. The news stories and editorials related to Pulwama attack published on February 15, 2019, a day after the attack, on the front pages of The Indian Express, The Hindu, The Times of India and The Hindustan Times were considered for the analysis.

## Headline and Sensationalism

The headline is an extremely important component of every news article that performs multiple functions: summarizing the story, attracting attention, and signaling the voice and style of the newspaper (Conboy, 2006,[4]). Headlines are universally read and they establish the tone of news reports because of their prominence. Headlines create the first impression in the mind of a reader headlines is the more enhanced (Allport & Lepkin, 1943,[5]). Headlines and other forms of discourse are naturally predisposed to present a specific version of truth, reality, or world order (MacRitche and Seedat, 2008,[6]). Headlines manifest the ability of discourse to limit or enable the construction of a topic in a certain way. Headlines allow media to easily influence readers' interpretation (Cohen, 1963 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008,[6]). Maria Konnikova (2016,[7]), a Russian-American journalist, believes that sensational headlines could lead readers astray and can subtly shift the perception of the text that follows.

## Analysis of nationwide newspapers

In this paper, the researchers have selected headlines, which were published in major newspapers of India. The role and the message of a headline are always crucial to begin with. For sensationalized news reports, media compromises the basic tenets of news reporting. There are various factors that lead to the compromising of objectivity, they being the race for TRP. When one digs deeper into the working of Indian media, the focus goes to ownership of media organizations. The nexus between media owners and political parties determines the outcome of the media content.

The following factors are taken into account while describing headlines related to Pulwama attack.

- Nature of the headline with respect to the news report
- A detailed analysis of the headline based on national security
- India-Pakistan discourse based on Kashmir centric politics
- The usage of the term national security and the possible comments

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**Table: The headlines of different national newspapers over the attack.**

Pulwama Attack in Newspaper Headlines			
The Indian Express	The Hindu	The Times of India	Hindustan Times
<p>1. In worst terror attack in valley, car bomber kills 37 CRPF men</p> <p>2. Governor admits Intelligence failure... we are at fault also</p> <p>3. Witness: Blast so big that ground shook, we were tossed aside.</p> <p>4. The prime accused: How and why Jaish is upping its deadly attack</p> <p>5. A sawmill worker, he joined Jaish Last March.</p> <p>6. IEDs, car borne suicide bombers a new challenge, say officers: For CRPF, attack massive setback, a new challenge</p>	<p>37 CRPF men killed in J&amp;K suicide attack</p> <p>Resurgent Jaish Poses new challenge to security apparatus</p> <p>Suicide car bombing returns to valley after 18 years</p>	<p>39 CRPF troopers killed in Jaish suicide SUV attack in Pulwama</p> <p>Allowing civilian vehicles on route proved costly</p> <p>Attack likely to force fresh pre-poll security review</p> <p>Parties condemn on terror attack on CRPF convoy</p> <p>Take concrete steps to prevent such attacks: Priyanka</p> <p>Security agencies fear such attacks could become norm</p> <p>China's veto allows Azhar to carry out terror attacks.</p> <p>AF war veteran may be mastermind</p> <p>US, Russia condemn attack</p>	<p>40 CRPF men killed in J&amp;K terror attack</p> <p>20-year-old militant carried out the attack</p> <p>Convoy of around 2500 CRPF men had left Jammu at 3:30am</p> <p>Rajnath takes stock of situation, to visit J&amp;K today</p> <p>Kashmir: Centre must choose options carefully</p>

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<p>7. "Take strong steps, restore Peace"</p> <p>8. Parties condemn attack, Rahul cancels Luncheon meet with G-20 Envoys</p> <p>9. J&amp;K police plan CCTV cover for over 400km of highways</p> <p>10. I&amp;B issues advisory to news channels</p> <p>11. Sacrifices won't go in vain, says PM, as Rajnath names Pak, vows strong reply</p> <p>12. "The nation mourns".</p> <p>The killing of CRPF soldiers sears the nation with grief, this moment also calls for all to summon wisdom and foresight.</p> <p>13. Jammu trade body gives bandh call</p> <p>Other major attacks</p>			
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In the above Table, various patterns were observed in the news stories with respect to the attack in Pulwama. *Indian Express* uses the term, “car bomber” without jumping into any conclusion prior to any examination. Keeping a balanced headline in mind and waiting for the investigative team to finish the job and afterwards make a statement based on the incident. The *Indian Express* has also placed the news story on the front page of the paper with a picture that gives a visual representation of the incident as well.

The news stories are then followed by various headlines about the statements by Governor of J&K who described the incident an “intelligence failure”. *Indian Express* has exclusively followed the incident on another special Jammu and Kashmir page and named it ‘Pulwama Attack’ where many small stories are also given space related to the attack. Moreover, an editorial is also given space in the same issue of the newspaper. All these news stories with varied headlines appear in the newspaper in one day, thus giving an ample space for discussion and deliberation about the incident throughout the columns of the paper.

The same headline is reversed in case of *The Hindustan* that proposes it to be a suicide attack. The pre conclusive term ‘suicide attack’, makes it more or less deliberate and self-investigative by media by itself.

Over and over again the headlines are manicured in such a way that the term ‘nation’ and ‘national security’ are given wider prominence.

There are certain reasons why newspapers choose to use the word ‘nation’ in their headlines. One of the most important reason is “uniting the people in the name of patriotic or nationalistic sentiments.”

Secondly, ‘nation’ and ‘national security’ instigates a common citizen against its neighbor, Pakistan, during the matters of terror and insurgency attacks. Thus, the careful crafting of the ‘security’ word in news headlines makes it more readable but less objective. Likewise, ‘security’ describes the power of Indian defense system on borders and the role of its armed forces in keeping the nation safe. A common man imagines his/her ‘security’ as an unavoidable need and under threat from the enemy.

Social representations, then, ‘establish an order’ and make the unfamiliar familiar, enabling the known and the unknown to be included in a pre-established category and they enable communication to take place, communication based on a shared code. (Serge Moscovici, n.d.,[8]).

Another important term taken into account by all the four newspapers is ‘terror’. This terror creates a pre-notioned viewpoint and a conclusive statement of the action that has no place in the domain. Terror supersedes with the idea of fear and thus makes the headline more personal and private to the extent that a common man translates this fear into the automated generated suicide bombings, militant groups, Pakistan, September 11, Mumbai attack, Uri attack, Parliament attack. All these episodes are thus clubbed into one word and carefully placed in all the news headlines

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thus making it more and more personal. Moreover, the nature of headlines here becomes more mobile and more active rather than passive in any sense and its condensed ideas are simplified in such a way that it is easily understood by a citizen and interpreted with respect to the networks of meanings.

**Table: The choice of keywords being used in the newspapers.**

<b>The Indian Express</b>	<b>The Hindu</b>	<b>The Times of India</b>	<b>The Hindustan Times</b>
terror attack	suicide attack	Jaish suicide	terror attack
Intelligence failure	Jaish		choose options
deadly attack, Jaish	Suicide car bombing		
strong steps	war veteran		
Pakistan	terror attack		

Now the other term that has been broadly used and exploited is 'Pakistan'. Moscovici points out in a powerful article on social representations that naming a nation creates a fictitious entity which is almost invariably then personified (Moscovici, n.d., [8]).

No doubt, the militant organizations and their associations operate out of Pakistan but the argument is only supported through its own valid hatred and spatial disagreements over Kashmir and many other factors that have kept the conflict alive through these years.

Moscovici says that such representations make a fictitious entity to a nation and its people is defined from time to time by ill framed news (the psychology of action behind that). This poor framing allows a common man make a generalized opinion over a web of political course of action.

The non-acceptance of dialogue process and the deliberation on politics post the terror attack was the outcome of media content which played a crucial roles behind the formation of public sphere.

Another aspect of headlines that has been craftily exploited from time to time is 'Kashmir'. The issue of Kashmir based sentiments and the careful usage of 'K' word has been a blessing in disguise. Kashmir prior to independence was under the autocratic rule and thus the ordeal of its impending solution within the United Nations grounds stays

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unresolved. The problem is simple, no dialogue process has been generated so far in this regard, and if in the past, some dialogue process, the people representation from Kashmir has been over and over again been nullified throughout the whole process.

The attack is suggested to be a handy work of groups based in Pakistan but little has been said in the reportage about why the attack was carried out in the first place.

The primary rule of headline here is sufficed in the same way and the nouns like 'Jaish', 'Kashmir' are used in such a way that people get an immediate attention as well as picture in their minds about terror and how it works in ways beyond understanding. Kronig (2004,[9]) states "political and media power have been merging in an unprecedented way." This peculiarity is as a result of "biased news stories", "illogical claims", "waging war through channels", "predetermined results".

## **Conclusion:**

Headlines draw a kind of attention that has wide impact on the psyche of the readers. The twisting of headlines during crisis pose a serious threat to law and order and can lead to the snowballing of the violent situation. There is a sharp decline in meaningful headline writing and the claims of them being true are challenged by media professionals and researchers. This circular thought-provoking hatred, fit for vote bank politics, determines the idea behind every source and action. A problem in Indian newspapers is seen when a single incident is dissected on multiple platforms. Upholding ethical concepts like neutrality can open up the opportunities for more nuanced and objective coverage of volatile situations like Pulwama. Moreover, if national media distorts facts, the role of local media comes into focus. Local media – which are close to epicenter of incidents such as of Pulwama – can present a more clearer picture contrary to the coverage of outstation media organizations. To understand and acknowledge the basic blueprint of journalism, it should be widely taught in school as a subject and the concept of citizen journalism should be given more and more importance. The sources of news should be questioned over and over again and the ethics of newspaper and media professionals should be bought under scanner from time to time. News should not satisfy self-created and ultra-nationalistic sentiments rather should be more objective and accurate. It should not support or suppress, rather it should be more liberating than what truth generally does.

In the analysis, we can find many types of patterns in headlines in such a way that it forms a presumptive opinion beforehand. So, the crux of what news meant to "inform" changes to "implant opinion" which in every way is wrong and against the ethics of journalism. National media has been using such terms to insinuate various concepts and through those the efficiency of news reporting and serious journalism is at constant risk. This over sensationalizing and hyping and making presumptive idea without any solid grounds is what steals the essence of a report. A free and fair, objective based reporting is missing in all these four national newspapers which puts most of the news stories



they write in a broad spectrum of further analysis. The news stories and their analysis also made it clear that how framing and choice of words has to be very neutral and light so that no panic and havoc is created. It also has given a basic understanding of things that journalists have started to make use of the wrong side of power to bend the news angle to a different side.

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