

Pakistani media's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: A retrospective analysis

**Muhammad Rafi Khan, Zulaikha Mashkoor, Saadia Tariq,
Uzma Naz and Sajid Mehmood Shahzad***

Abstract: The COVID-19 Pandemic became one of the biggest threats that confronted societies and governments all over the world including Pakistan. It may, therefore, be relevant to assess the Pakistani media, which still is the source of information for the masses. Though the Pandemic is now over, the media today must learn or rather re-orient with a 'New Pandemic Narrative' for Pakistan whilst keeping the highest standards of truth, accuracy, and responsibility. It is crucial to return the focus to actual science, evidence, and consensus rather than partisan misinformation and sensationalism. Only with informed citizens can Pakistan effectively come out from a future crisis and that cannot happen without the anchoring of facts. Public and community health is often overlooked by mainstream media, which tends to prioritize politico-social issues. This poses a greater challenge for media professionals in gathering data, reporting facts, and disseminating information. This study employs a descriptive method that uses empirical data to assess the function of the media in Pakistan and analyze its responsibilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pakistan, media, crisis communication, public health

Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, most commonly COVID-19, took approximately seven million lives globally (JHU 2022) and about thirty thousand in Pakistan (MNHS 2022). Initially during the COVID-19 Pandemic individuals and businesses were in fear of loss of their jobs, and deteriorating health due to the Coronavirus, whilst there were publications that fueled the situation by producing sensational headlines and fake news (Miller et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the voices

* Muhammad Rafi Khan; Uzma Naz; Sajid Mehmood Shahzad
School of International Relations, Minhaj University Lahore, Pakistan

Zulaikha Mashkoor; Saadia Tariq
School of Statistics, Minhaj University Lahore, Pakistan

of authority from the printed as well as the electronic media responded positively to the situation by disseminating health directives, educating the populace on the measures to be taken to avoid the spread of the disease, and putting pressure on the government through broadcasting the information (Naughton 2021). Collaborating, over time, amid the severity of the situation and working with minimal workforce, these ratings-focused networks continue to have unverified guests giving unproven information and promoting various products to cure the virus (Wang et al. 2021). Thus, while they attracted even more attention, it sometimes eroded proper journalistic standards and, many times, did not promote sound public health policies.

In the technology space, there were tries to fight fake news on social media through posting genuine informative content (Mustvairo and Bebawi 2019). Other mainstream online sources also offered valuable information on the trends of cases and policies as well as medical developments at all hours.

On the other side, primetime television shows degenerated to whataboutism, a phenomenon that watered down actual crisis evaluation and solution-based discussions with partisan bickering. Even some organizations (Wang et al. 2021), especially NGOs, were blamed for the spread of COVID-19 without any factual evidence.

Together with the ongoing popularization of masses, the Pakistani press needs to perform the function of a critic that will demand accountability from the healthcare authorities (Siddique 2020). Policy critiques should hold practical suggestions that participants in the policy debate can implement instead of simply tossing around ideological buzzwords. It is now high time for Pakistan's media houses to correct the earlier mistakes in managing a crisis while the lack of proper information can be fatal (Salam 2020). The present study draws upon Khan and Shahzad (2024) and provides more in-depth statistical analysis of surveys, based on the perspectives of media professional about responses of Pakistani media organizations to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Utilizing the survey conducted earlier, the authors further applied Chi-Square tests to either support or reject the hypothesis and generated bar charts utilizing R-studio.

Hypotheses

H1: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote respect and empathy.

H2: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote self-censorship.

H3: Media Organizations in Pakistan regularly conduct crisis communication and planning.

H4: Media Organizations in Pakistan strive to debunk fake news.

H5: Media Organizations in Pakistan hire healthcare and medical professionals.

H6: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote citizen journalism.

H7: It is good that media Organizations in Pakistan receive governmental funding.

H8: Media Organizations in Pakistan provide protective gear to journalists.

H9: Media Organizations in Pakistan provide health and life insurance.

Methodology

Media personnel used the term “emergency” as a broad term to refer to the pandemic. This term was associated with actions that can be taken during any emergency, such as outbreaks or disasters. Additionally, specific ideas were derived from studies conducted by other researchers to address the COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact on Pakistan. Examining the function of media in Pakistan and forecasting its role during the COVID-19 Pandemic will be limited to a descriptive analysis of factual evidence. The authors conducted a survey for quantitative assessment based on the 5-point Likert Scale (see Appendix – table 1).

The authors applied simple random sampling methods (Singh 2003, Mitra and Pathak 1984) and contacted the respondents through random phone calls and noted their responses manually. To improve clarity and fair evaluation, demographics of the respondents, i.e., age, gender, education, were noted (table 2).

Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the professional relationship of the respondents. The authors, in response to the respondents' request, deliberately omitted any reference of their institutional or organizational affiliation in both the survey results and the later discussion. Any unintentional similarity in the scenario or language is not intended.

Chi-Square tests were applied to draw results from the given size of responses.

Results

Based on the responses received through surveys, the authors conducted the statistical analysis through R-Studio, drew results, as

stated in figure 1 (see Appendix), which shows that respondents of National & Citywide TV 100% agree that their organization tries to be first and promotes respect & empathy while 63.6% of respondents of National & Citywide Daily agree with the same. There are 18.2% respondents of National & Citywide Daily who disagree and 18.2% respondents who cannot decide whether their organization promotes respect & empathy.

76.2% of the respondents of National & Citywide TV agree that their organization encourages self-censorship while 36.4% respondents of National & Citywide Daily agree with the same. There are 36.4% respondents of National & Citywide Daily who disagree and 27.3% respondents who cannot decide whether their organization encourages self-censorship. The figure shows that of the respondents of National & Citywide TV, only 28.6% agree that their organization encourages crisis communication planning while 54.5% respondents of National & Citywide Daily agree with the same. There are 19% respondents of National & Citywide TV who cannot decide while 9.2% respondents of National & Citywide Daily who cannot decide whether their organization encourages crisis communication planning.

From figure, the respondents of National & Citywide TV only 9.5% agree that their organization debunk fake news while there are 81% respondents disagree. There are 18.2% respondents of National & Citywide Daily who agree and 72.7% respondents who disagree whether their organization debunk fake news. The figure shows that only 4.8% of respondents of National & Citywide TV, only 4.8% agree that their organization hires healthcare professionals as employees while there are 90.5% respondents who disagree. There are 54.5% of respondents of National & Citywide Daily who agree while 45.5% of respondents disagree that their organization hires healthcare professionals as employees.

42.9% of the respondents of National & Citywide TV agree that their organization encourages citizen journalism while 54.5% of respondents of National & Citywide Daily agree with the same. There are 23% of respondents of National & Citywide TV who cannot decide whether their organization encourages citizen journalism. The figure also shows that among the respondents of National & Citywide TV 100% agree that their organization receiving governmental help is a promising idea while 72.7% respondents of National & Citywide Daily agree the same.

Among the responses from National & Citywide TV only 9.5% agree that their organization provides protective gear & special emergency allowance while 85.7% respondents disagree the same. There are only 9.1% of respondents of National & Citywide Daily who agree that their organization provides protective gear & special emergency allowance. Moreover, among the respondents of National & Citywide TV only 19% agree that their organization offers health/life/insurance/special fund in accidental death while there are 61.9% respondents of disagree the same. There are 18.2% respondents of National & Citywide Daily who agree and 45.5% respondents who disagree that their organization offers health/life/insurance/special fund in accidental death. Based on the p-Value, the analyses have produced the results against the alternate hypotheses (see Appendix – table 4). The key findings include the following:

- Both citywide television stations as well as national and citywide newspapers show a dedication to fostering respect and empathy within their establishments, albeit with varying degrees of agreement among survey participants.
- There exists a contrast in beliefs about the promotion of self-censorship. While most TV viewers acknowledge encouragement, newspaper respondents present a more diverse range of responses.
- Newspaper respondents tend to agree on crisis communication planning, while TV respondents suggest variations in how organizations prepare for handling crises effectively.
- When it comes to addressing fake news, most newspaper respondents disagree with the idea of discrediting it, unlike TV respondents, who show agreement. This shows differing approaches to combating misinformation.
- About the hiring of healthcare professionals, there is consensus among TV respondents, while many newspaper respondents support existing practices in their organizations.
- Respondents from both types of organizations express dissatisfaction with the provision of gear emergency allowances and insurance benefits. This highlights gaps in support for employees.

Discussion

The study findings provide insights into the practices and attitudes of national and citywide TV and national and citywide newspaper outlets. By analyzing respondents' views on respect, empathy, self-censorship encouragement, crisis communication planning, managing news, hiring

healthcare professionals, and providing gear and insurance benefits, important assumptions have been drawn.

Both national and citywide TV and national and citywide newspaper outlets prioritize promoting respect and empathy within their organizations. While there are differing opinions among respondents, statistical analysis confirms that these values are central to both types of organizations, albeit with some variations in perception.

However, there is a difference in views when it comes to encouraging self-censorship. While most TV respondents acknowledge encouragement in their workplaces, newspaper respondents show a range of responses. However, comparing the two types of organizations, the results of the study do not differentiate between the two in their self-censorship perception, hence therapy for further examination of causes of such perception to be conducted.

There are variations in perception in the TV and the newspaper respondents about the planning of crisis communication and response to fake news. There are important finding points to the fact that in as many as people who read newspapers have similar perceptions about crisis communication planning, data analysis provided results that show that both types of organization do not place a special emphasis on crisis Communication planning or eradicating misperception; these are some areas that organizational strategies and practices could be improved on.

However, there is general agreement about the recruitment of healthcare professionals among the TV viewers, yet the majority of those who responded by newspaper favor initiatives in their organizations. These concerns raise questions about why different sectors of media organizations provide unequal treatments in their human resource management; as a result, prompting a closer examination of the factors influencing hiring practices.

At the core of its argument, the study supports that respondents across both organization's types have a common perception of major gaps in employee support by organizations during emergencies based on responses that concern provision of equipment, emergency benefits, and insurance coverage.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study aim at contributing to the understanding of organizational culture and practices relating to responding with media

organizations to emergencies like COVID-19 Pandemic. They highlight the need to encourage appreciation, understanding and professionalism in the communication process whilst addressing such topics as; self-censorship, managing crises, fake news, and how to oversee such news. Closing these gaps and enhancing effectiveness and ethical standards in media organization is, therefore, fundamental towards eradicating accuracy and serving the public interest.

Recommendations:

Improve communication and transparency

Organizations need to address how self-censorship works and how to create communication channels to solve the issue. As for the business internal processes, encouraging communication and feedback systems can minimize the extent of censorship and increase trust.

Invest to strengthen crisis readiness

Because there is debate on when organizations should start planning for crisis communication, organizations should consider spending on crisis management and —training. This includes having outlined processes in place for how drills are to be done and the right technology to use in issuing information during crises.

Tackle fake news

Though the public relations role calls for filtering knowledge, organizations should ensure that fact checking mechanisms are developed and that media literacy is promoted to curb the release of information. To increase credibility in the organization's reporting of information, the organization should involve fact-checking mechanisms and be an initiative-taking organization for its audiences.

Prioritize employee wellbeing

The employer should ensure that the employees are safe at work by supplying protective gear, calling for help or rescue where necessary and offering health, accident, and emergency insurance where and when possible. This involves assessing the risks, making sure the employees are trained in safety measures, and preparing provisions for those who meet health or safety issues.

Broaden hiring practices

There are differences in the beliefs towards hiring health care professionals. Consequently, organizations are recommended to consider diverse ways of sourcing for health care professionals that can solve their needs.

If implemented, these are some of the ways by which national and citywide TV and newspapers can enhance its culture and agree with

the norms so that they would be able to meet the needs of its viewers and the communities in an increasingly challenging environment.

Appendix

Variables	Question	Measurement
Respect & empathy	My organization tries to be first and promotes respect & empathy.	5-point Likert Scale
Self-censorship	I impose self-censorship in newsgathering and dissemination, and my organization encourages this act.	5-point Likert Scale
Crisis communication planning	My organization encourages crisis communication planning and stakeholder interaction.	5-point Likert Scale
Debunk fake news	My organization has a specialized social media monitoring desk to debunk fake news.	5-point Likert Scale
Healthcare professionals	My organization hires medical experts or healthcare professionals as full-time/part-time employees.	5-point Likert Scale
Citizen journalism	My organization encourages citizen journalism/voluntary news gatherers, especially amid emergencies.	5-point Likert Scale
Governmental assistance	It will be a good idea if my organization receives governmental assistance amid emergencies.	5-point Likert Scale
Protective care	My organization provides emergency protective gear & gives a special emergency allowance.	5-point Likert Scale

Table 1. Construct of Questionnaire

Pakistani media's response

Breakup	Tally	%	
Age	25-34 Y	17	53.1
	35-44 Y	6	18.7
	45-60 Y	8	25
Gender	Male	24	75
	Female	8	25
	Transgender	0	0
Education	Undergraduate	21	65.6
	Graduate	10	31.2
	Postgraduate	1	3.1
Employment Status	Employed	27	84.3
	Unemployed	5	15.6
Location	Lahore	18	56.2
	Karachi	8	25
	Islamabad	6	18.7

Table 2. Demographic Enquiry of Respondents

	Sources		Respondents	%
	Tally	%		
National-level TV channel	7	53.8	21	65.6
Citywide TV channel	2	15.3	5	15.6
National level newspaper	3	23.3	4	12.5
Citywide newspaper	1	7.6	2	6.2
Total	13	100.0	32	100.0

Table 3. Professional Association of Respondents

Hypothesis	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Results	
H1: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote respect and empathy.	0.013
Supported	
H2: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote self-censorship.	0.086
Not Supported	
H3: Media Organizations in Pakistan regularly conduct crisis communication and planning.	0.341
Not Supported	
H4: Media Organizations in Pakistan strive to debunk fake news.	0.780
Not Supported	
H5: Media Organizations in Pakistan hire healthcare and medical professionals.	0.005
Supported	
H6: Media Organizations in Pakistan promote citizen journalism.	0.211
Not Supported	

H7: It is good that media Organizations in Pakistan receive governmental funding.	0.042
Supported	
H8: Media Organizations in Pakistan provide protective gear to journalists.	0.891
Not Supported	
H9: Media Organizations in Pakistan provide health and life insurance.	0.544
Not Supported	

Table 4. Chi-Square Tests based on Association between organization-type and their perspectives against Variables of Interest

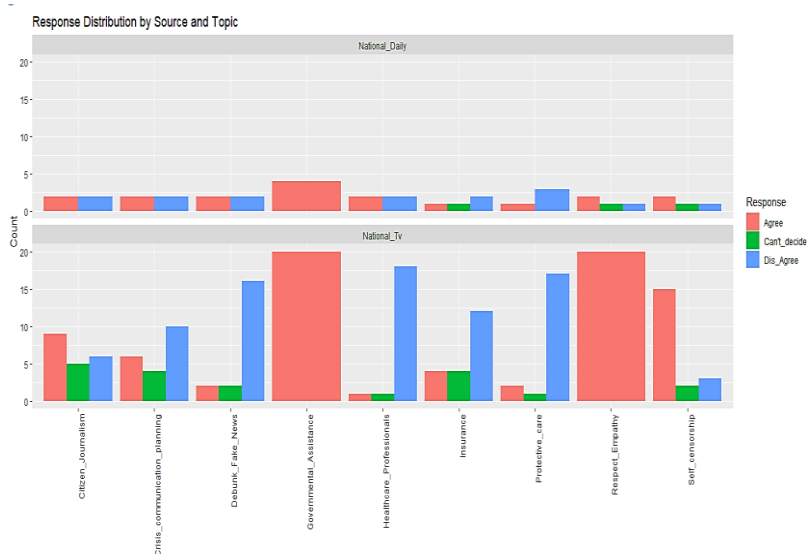


Fig.1. Comparison of organization-type and responses of Pakistani media towards the COVID-19 pandemic

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