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War Hysteria in the Newsroom: Television News Coverage of Recent India-Pakistan Skirmishes

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to understand the contribution of television news channels to war hysteria during the recent India-Pakistan hostilities, triggered by Pakistan sponsored Pahalgam terror attack and India's operation 'Sindoor'. Based on the agenda setting and media framing theories, this research tries to examine how renowned news channels of India and Pakistan framed and influenced public opinion through sensationalism, misinformation and disinformation. Qualitative content analysis of prime-time television programme, supported by social media posts have been adopted to discover the ways in which the reporting accentuated tensions, polarized nations and stalled diplomacy. It was found that truth remained the first casualty in the conflict, as television news channels of both the countries gave precedence to TRP over truth.

Key words: India, Pakistan, Terror, Sindoor, Television, Prime-time.

1. Introduction

India and Pakistan have been on the crossroads ever since Britishers left the subcontinent in 1947, with Kashmir as one of the major bone of contentions between the two superpowers, which has made the India-Pakistan conflict as the south Asia's most volatile geopolitical tension. Both the countries have fought three full fledged wars, besides intermittent ceasefire violations. In the recent past, a terror attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir evoked military response by the India through Operation Sindoor, which further escalated the rivalry to a dangerous precipice between these nuclear-armed neighbors. In any form of conflict, media remains one of the primary sources of information for the public within and outside the conflict zone, making the ever important role of the media in shaping and influencing public opinion. However, in the race of viewership and Television Rating Points (TRP), their coverage of conflict is often descended into war hysteria, marked by sensationalized reporting, hyper-nationalist rhetoric, and the dissemination of unverified claims, which intensified public fear and animosity.

The present paper attempts to understand the role of television news channels of both the countries in creating war hysteria during the recent escalation. It also tries to find how these news channels framed the conflict, invoked sensationalism and disseminated misinformation, based on the analysis of primary data from broadcasts and further insights from social media platforms.

Objectives

The major objectives of the study include:

1. How television news channels in India and Pakistan frame recent skirmishes?
2. How sensationalism and misinformation amplified war hysteria?
3. What are the moral and societal implications of such reporting?

The study is grounded in media framing theory, which asserts that media certainly shapes perception of the audiences (Entman, 1993), and agenda-setting theory, which states that the media play significant role in prioritizing issues for public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Framing and Agenda-Setting

Entman stated that media framing theory provides a framework to understand how news organizations shape public opinion by selective presentation of information (Entman, 1993). It has been seen that during conflict, media often employ frames that focuses on nationality, criticism of opposition, or intensify threats, creating 'Us vs Them' dichotomy (Galtung, 1998).

Whereas, agenda-setting theory asserts that media influence public preferences by highlighting selective issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the India-Pakistan context, television channels have conventionally framed conflicts to support with state narratives, reinforcing nationalist sentiments and marginalizing peace-oriented perspectives (Yousaf, 2017).

2.2 War Hysteria and Sensationalism

One of the biggest negatives of war is panic and fear created by various factors, especially the media. This increase in public fear and aggression is called war hysteria and it is driven by how media portrays particular conflict setting (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Similarly, exaggerated headlines, sensitive headlines and theatrical visuals, intended to prioritize audience engagement over accuracy is called sensationalism (Moeller, 1999). Studies on India-Pakistan media dynamics divulges a model of sensationalized reporting during crises, with channels contending for viewership through provoking rhetoric and unproven claims (Chakraborty, 2021).

2.3 Role of Television in Conflict Reporting

With the characteristics of visual immediacy and mass reach, Television news is probably the potent force in shaping public opinion. Having unstable literacy rates, television remains a dominant medium of information in India and Pakistan, with channels like AajTak, Republic TV, and ARY News possess significant influence (Thussu, 2018). However, the cutthroat pursuit of TRP (Television Rating Points) ratings often drives these organizations to prefer sensationalism over journalistic integrity (Chakraborty, 2021).

3. Methodology

This research uses qualitative content analysis to study television news reporting of recent India-Pakistan skirmishes, following the Pahalgam terrorist attack and India's Operation Sindoor. The analysis is grounded on prime-time news and talk shows on high-viewership Indian channels, including AajTak, Republic TV, Zee News, NDTV, and Pakistani channels-Geo TV, ARY News, chosen for their popularity and public opinion-influencing power. These channels provide a combination of sensationalist (e.g., Republic TV, ARY News) and generally moderate (e.g., NDTV, Geo TV) sources, providing a balanced sample.

3.1 Data Collection

The sample comprises 48 hours of video, consisting of 6 hours on each channel for the duration of 8 days with a focus on evening transmission (7–10 PM) when viewing is at its highest. Video was obtained from recorded shows in archives on offer through official sites of channels, YouTube, and media monitoring sites. Additional information from X posts and web sources (Al Jazeera, Reuters, The Hindu) was obtained to place public opinion and authenticate statements on telecasts. X posts were sampled with keywords such as "Pahalgam attack," "Operation Sindoor," and "India-Pakistan war" to record real-time responses and disinformation trends.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The content analysis is based on three dimensions:

1. Framing: To decide the dominant narratives, including, nationalism, victimhood, aggression through the use of Entman's (1993) framing model analyzes the problem definition, causal attribution and suggested solutions.
2. Sensationalism: To evaluate the use of sensational language like "destroyed," "captured", vivid imagery like unconfirmed attack video, and unsubstantiated allegations, in line with Moeller's (1999) sensationalist report criteria.
3. Misinformation: Identification of unconfirmed or spurious reports (e.g., inflated casualty numbers, imaginary attacks) by cross-checking with reliable sources such as foreign news agencies and official releases.

3.3 Coding Process

A coding framework was created to sort content according to the aforementioned dimensions. Two individual coders coded the footage to establish reliability, with intercoder agreement measured through Cohen's kappa (target ≥ 0.8). Discussion was used to resolve disagreements. Themes were inductively derived, enabling emergent patterns (e.g., nuclear escalation rhetoric) to drive the analysis.

4. Data Presentation

Table 1: Framing of the Conflict

Channel	Country	Dominant Frame	Key Narrative	Example Quote/Headline
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AajTak	India	Nationalist/Aggressive	Operation Sindoor as justified retaliation; Pakistan as terrorist sponsor	"AajTak destroys Karachi Port"
Republic TV	India	Hyper-Nationalist	India's military dominance; Pakistan as enemy to be crushed	"Operation Sindoor is still on!"
Zee News	India	Aggressive	India's superiority; calls for capturing PoK	"Zee destroys Islamabad"
NDTV	India	Nationalist/Moderate	Strategic focus on PoK; restrained but supportive of military action	"India targets PoK in response to Pahalgam"
Geo TV	Pakistan	Victimhood	India as aggressor; Pakistan as victim of unprovoked attacks	"Indian strikes kill civilians in border villages"
ARY News	Pakistan	Victimhood/Defensive	India's claims as propaganda; Pakistan's resilience	"India's lies exposed: No militants, only civilians"

Table 2: Sensationalism in Coverage

Channel	Country	Sensational Elements	Impact on War Hysteria	Example
AajTak	India	Dramatic visuals, exaggerated claims	Fueled public panic and calls for war	Unverified drone strike footage; "Karachi Port destroyed"
Republic TV	India	Inflammatory rhetoric, hyperbolic statements	Heightened aggression; targeted dissenters	"We arrested General Asim Munir!"
Zee News	India	Nuclear escalation speculation	Increased public fear of catastrophic war	"Will India wipe out Pakistan?"
NDTV	India	Moderate visuals, strategic focus	Less sensational but reinforced nationalist fervor	Maps showing PoK targets
Geo TV	Pakistan	Graphic civilian casualty images	Stoked public outrage and anti-India sentiment	"Fidayeen attacks repel Indian forces"
ARY News	Pakistan	Unverified claims of Indian losses	Amplified defensive patriotism	"Indian pilots captured in PoK"

Table 3: Misinformation Instances

Channel	Country	Misinformation Example	Verification Status	Impact
AajTak	India	Pakistani drone attack on Shambhu Temple	Debunked: No official confirmation	Sparked fear of civilian attacks
Republic TV	India	300 Pakistani casualties in Operation Sindoor	Contradicted: Lower estimates by Reuters	Exaggerated India's military success
Zee News	India	Pakistani surrender in PoK	False: Recycled 2019 footage	Fueled nationalist euphoria
NDTV	India	Limited misinformation; unverified PoK claims	Unclear: Lacked specific evidence	Reinforced strategic narrative
Geo TV	Pakistan	Indian strikes on mosques and schools	Debunked: Recycled Syria footage (Al Jazeera)	Incited protests in Lahore, Karachi
ARY News	Pakistan	Indian use of chemical weapons	False: No evidence; mentalist reports	Amplified anti-India sentiment on X

Table 1 summarizes the patterns and inferences regarding the framing of the Conflict, where all the Indian channels endorsed nationalist frames but with different intensity. AajTak, Republic TV, and Zee News employed aggressive, triumphalist frames depicting Operation Sindoor as a crushing blow to Pakistan's terror (e.g., "AajTak demolishes Karachi Port"). These frames go in line with hyper-nationalism, accentuating military power of India and evil-doing of Pakistan. NDTV stressed upon the strategic objectives, like conquering Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and not just destruction. While both the news channels of Pakistan i.e Geo TV and ARY News showed Pakistan as a victim, contesting India's claim of targeting terrorists. The tale of victimhood stressed civilian adversity and India's alleged imperialist agendas, evoking cynical patriotism.

Indian channels relied on unpleasant, active framing (retaliation and dominance), and Pakistani channels took a defensive stance (victimhood and resilience). This led to national agendas, with India's display of strength during the Modi administration and Pakistan's attempt to deflect censure in the face of domestic pressure. The Television news channels of both the countries reinforced 'Us vs Them' dichotomy, criticizing each other and leaving little room for diplomatic narratives.

Table 2 discusses the trends and remarks regarding sensationalism in Coverage, where Indian channels such as AajTak, Republic TV, and Zee News extensively used sensational content—tense visuals (unverified drone shots), exaggerated statements ("We arrested General Asim Munir!"), and nuclear threats ("Will India annihilate Pakistan?"). Such strategies were employed to grab attention and stir nationalist passion. NDTV was less sensational in using maps and tactical discussions but also played a part in war rhetoric by supporting military goals.

While, Pakistani television channels Geo TV and ARY News replicated this strategy using graphic footage of purported civilian casualties and unsubstantiated reports of Indian loss (e.g., "Indian pilots captured"). Their sensationalism relied on emotional manipulation, weighting outrage through victimology imagery.

Indian sensationalism was proactive and aggressive, hailing military victories, whereas Pakistani sensationalism was reactive, focusing on suffering to mobilize resistance. Republic TV's inflammatory discourse (e.g., targeting critics) was exceptionally confrontational in contrast to Geo TV's civilian suffering. Exaggerated language and imagery were employed by both sides to maximize fear and aggression, embodying Moeller's (1999) definition of sensationalism as emotional exploitation. Dependence on speculative allegations (e.g., nuclear danger, captured pilots) fueled public alarm.

Table 3 reports trends and remarks regarding misinformation Instances, where the Indian channels AajTak, Republic TV, and Zee News reported major misinformation, including inflated casualty tallies (300 Pakistani killed), and false surrenders. NDTV had fewer but still produced unverified claims of PoK, showing the milder kind of misinformation, while Pakistani channels Geo TV and ARY News disseminated false reports of Indian strikes on schools and mosques (discredited as old news footage) and chemical weapons use, both without evidence. They produced misinformation primarily to show India as barbaric in order to justify defensive posturing.

Indian disinformation exaggerated military victories to create morale, whereas Pakistani disinformation highlighted civilian casualties to create sympathy. Both used sources without verification, disregarding fact-checking, which went viral on X and deceived viewers.

The tables uncovered a competitive sensationalism-driven, nationalist agenda-influenced, and ethics-compromised media environment that cumulatively generated war hysteria during the India-Pakistan conflict. Indian television's belligerent posturing and Pakistani television's victimhood narratives, fueled by false information and X, polarized the masses and hampered peace movements. These trends underscore the need for responsible reporting, strong fact-checking, and regulator vigilance to avert media contributions to conflict.

5. Findings

The qualitative content analysis of news on television from May 7 to May 14, 2025, illustrates how Indian and Pakistani news channels fueled war hysteria during India-Pakistan conflicts. The results are framed around framing, sensationalism, disinformation, and ethical considerations based on broadcasts of AajTak, Republic TV, Zee News, NDTV (India), Geo TV, and ARY News (Pakistan) supported by X posts and online sources.

5.1 Framing the Conflict

Indian channels consistently framed the hostilities as a retaliatory measure against Pakistan-backed terrorism and sympathized with the Pahalgam terror attack as a provocation that necessitated Operation Sindoor. Republic TV's repeated headline, "Operation Sindoor is still on! " represented India as firm and stronger militarily, affirming a nationalist frame. Zee News and AajTak, Indian Television channels portrayed India overpowering Pakistan with coverage such as damaging Karachi port by AajTak and capturing Islamabad by Zee news. Whereas, NDTV more subdued in tone emphasized on strategic goals, including capture of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, filled with nationalist sentiments but with greater restraint.

Whereas, Pakistani television showed India as the instigator, accusing it of being instrumental in orchestrating Pahalgam attack to pursue military action. Geo TV accentuated civilian suffering, creating reports regarding alleged Indian attacks on Pakistani villages, and ARY News labeled India's targeting militants as "propaganda." This victimhood story was strengthened on X, as Pakistani users posted unconfirmed pictures of civilian infrastructure hit, some later proven to be AI-generated or unrelated.

Both parties' shaping supported "us vs. them" frames with negligible space for de-escalation.

5.2 Sensationalism and War Hysteria

Over exaggeration of the incident was pervasive, with channels resorting to hyperbolic vocabulary, emotional imagery, and speculative statements to maximize public anxiety. Indian news channels showed alleged baseless video of drone attacks and missile launches with little or no context and often doctored. Republic TV claimed "arrest" of Pakistan's General Asim Munir, a misinformation to instigate viewers.

AajTak's news of "destroying Karachi Port" triggered massive terror, with users on X posting the clip with demands for war. Zee News speculated on nuclear retaliation, and guests on talk shows were discussing "wiping out Pakistan," heightening public tension.

Pakistani media followed the same trend. Geo TV aired unverified reports of "fidayeen attacks" by the Pakistani military and "captured Indian pilots," a repetition of the 2019 Balakot report but without evidence. ARY News showed graphic photos of claimed civilian casualties, fueling outrage among the public. Talk shows on each side included former generals and analysts who stoked war frenzy with visions of imminent escalation, with such catchphrases as "India's final assault" and "Pakistan's unbreakable defense" dominating the conversation. X posts were spread throughout with such hashtags as #IndiaAttacks and #PakistanStandsStrong trending worldwide.

5.3 Misinformation and Its Impact

Disinformation was another war hysteria inducer. Indian media reported false instances of Pakistani drone attacks at civilian targets, such as the Shambhu Temple in Jammu, without any such confirmation from official sources. Zee News had reported 300 Pakistani deaths in Operation Sindoor, which was later contradicted by international reports providing much lower figures. Pakistani channels countered with fabricated news of Indian attacks on mosques and schools that Al Jazeera and Reuters debunked as reused video images of other unrelated battles. X was a war zone for disinformation with Indian users posting fake videos of Pakistani surrenders and Pakistani users reporting Indian chemical attacks.

The implications were far-reaching. In India, misinformation about Pakistani hostility resulted in stock market volatility, with the Sensex declining by 3% on May 9, 2025. In Pakistan, misinformation about civilian casualties fueled protests in Karachi and Lahore, forcing the government to stand firm. The disinformation war strained relationships in diplomacy, with both nations accusing the other of attempting to manipulate perceptions. Even the May 11, 2025, U.S.-arranged ceasefire was greeted with outrage by the people fueled by media claims of ongoing abuses nearly wrecking the ceasefire.

The collaboration between television and social media amplified these issues. Indian X accounts, including those with a Hindutva tilt, targeted journalists and minorities for their criticism of the war narrative, whereas Pakistani handles spread anti-India propaganda, targeting Indian Muslims. The aggressive environment stifled nuanced debate and deepened societal fissures. Incapacity to fact-check or contextualize violated ethical standards of journalism, creating public distrust and regional volatility.

6. Discussion

The televised sensationalized reporting of the India-Pakistan hostilities of May 2025 maximally increased war hysteria, fitting into Galtung's (1998) theory of war journalism, which gives greater importance to war escalation than peace construction. The Indian channels Republic TV, AajTak, and Zee News presented Operation Sindoor as a valorous response to alleged Pakistani terrorism, by resorting to martial dominance posturing through aggressive language and unsubstantiated allegations such as "destroying Karachi Port.". On the other hand, Pakistani media like Geo TV and ARY News framed India as an imperialist aggressor, highlighting civilian casualties in order to mobilize domestic opinion. This polarized narrative based on nationalist agendas oversimplified intricate geopolitical matters into simplistic "us vs. them" framing that did not leave much space for subtle debate on de-escalation or diplomacy. The unrelenting emphasis on military victories and atrocities of the enemy, observed through sensational footage and alarmist nuclear speculation, increased fear and hostility in the public, showing how media can heighten tensions during crises (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The social impact of such war mania was substantial, further dividing the two nations. In India, television talk played a role in hyper-nationalism, with the likes of Republic TV demonizing the critics, like Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, as "anti-national." This followed on X, where Hindutva-aligned accounts harassed minorities and peace activists, labeling them as traitors. In Pakistan, Geo TV's victimhood frame fanned anti-India and religious sentiment, with ARY News' unfounded reports of mosque attacks rallying the public. Such reporting reinforced stereotypes—India is a Hindu bully, Pakistan is a terrorist state—hindering ground-level peace efforts and fueling communal tensions. The function of media towards polarizing the audience is consistent with Moeller's (1999) argument that sensationalism has the best setting when manipulation through emotions, often at the cost of social integration, is successful. The focus on minorities, especially Indian Muslims demonized on X, serves to illustrate how war mania is likely to spill over into domestic disturbances, undermining national cohesion in times of crisis.

Diplomatically, sensationalized reporting by the media undermined international efforts toward peace. The May 11, 2025, American-facilitated ceasefire, urged on by President Trump and Senator Rubio, was killed by public opinion created by television news. Indian television accusations of Pakistani violations of the truce and Pakistani grievances regarding ongoing Indian attacks created a climate of suspicion in which de-escalation was politically costly to both governments. This was reflective of Yousaf's (2017) observation that South Asian media prefer state agendas over factually driven reporting, tending to complicate conflict resolution. Both sides' misinformation—such as manipulated videos of drone attacks or civilian casualties—also muddled diplomatic waters since governments had to respond to popular backlash instead of reality. The failure of the media to confirm or put events into context thus prolonged the crisis, highlighting responsible reporting in situations of high stakes conflicts.

Indian and Pakistani coverage comparison discloses divergent but similar war hysteria strategies. Indian television relied on hyper-nationalism, with the Modi government's "strongman" image to frame Operation Sindoor as a success. This was seen in Republic TV's over-dramatization and AajTak's emphasis on military success, appealing to local viewers but isolating global observers. Pakistani channels, constrained by military influence, adopted a defensive posture, using victimhood narratives to deflect criticism and rally citizens. Geo TV's focus on civilian suffering and ARY News' rejection of Indian claims as "propaganda" mirrored India's approach in intent, if not style, as both prioritized audience loyalty over accuracy. This intersection emphasizes Chakraborty's (2021) contention that South Asian competitive media spaces promote sensationalism, led by TRP ratings and political pressures. The interaction with X, in which trolls and influencers were extending television narratives, further stimulated the hysteria cycle, hinting at a necessity for cross-platform regulatory systems.

The study highlights the ethical breakdowns of television journalism during the 2025 crisis, as channels prioritized viewership over integrity. The use of unverified sources, incomplete fact-checking, and vilification of dissenters broke rules of fairness and accuracy enumerated by Entman (1993). It was seen that due to war hysteria by the news channels of India and Pakistan, the credibility of military and government was compromised and this menace was multiplied by the spread of misinformation by X. This problem of war hysteria can be resolved only by following John Galtung's (1998) model of peace journalism, wherein focus is on solution, context and restraint, which may help in de-escalation. Moreover, educating journalists to focus on records and data rather than emotions and promoting media literacy among audience are important to make media as a bridge for peace .

7. Conclusion

The qualitative content analysis of TV news coverage in the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict finds Indian and Pakistani channels playing a central role in spreading war hysteria. Sensationalized framing, inflammatory language, and widespread misinformation on channels such as AajTak, Republic TV, Zee News, Geo TV, and ARY News fueled public fear, polarized society, and undercut diplomatic initiatives. Indian channels' hyper-nationalist presentation of Operation Sindoor as victory and Pakistani channels' narratives of victimhood prioritized viewers' participation at the expense of factuality, perpetuating adversarial "us vs. them" attitudes. X's engagement with this reinforced these impacts, propagating misinformation and singling out critics, which further exacerbated social tension and media credibility. Morally, the lack of fact-checking or contextualization broke newsroom ethics, with real-world impacts such as economic uncertainty and public agitation. This research highlighted accountable journalism that promotes peace-building instead of sensationalism. Inducing harsh regulations, encouraging instant fact-checking, promoting peace journalism training, and highlighting media literacy in the public are top measures to contain war hysteria in conflicts.

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