



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
Print ISSN: [3007-3103](https://doi.org/10.3007/3103) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](https://doi.org/10.3007/3111)
Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://www.openjournal.org/)



Winning Minds beyond Borders: Narrative Warfare and Strategic Storytelling in the Indo-Pak Information Conflict during Pahalgam Incident

Muhammad Huzaifa Bin Salih

PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan

Dr. Asghar Ali

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of narrative warfare and strategic storytelling in shaping public perceptions of the Pahalgam incident within the broader context of the Indo-Pak information conflict. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of media framing, agenda-setting, constructivism, and the propaganda model, the research explores how competing media systems in India and Pakistan constructed divergent narratives around the same event. The study argues that contemporary conflicts are increasingly fought not only through military and diplomatic means but also through discursive and symbolic struggles aimed at influencing domestic and international audiences. Through a qualitative analysis of media discourse, political communication, and institutional narratives, the article investigates how Indian media predominantly framed the incident through security, counterterrorism, and national sovereignty narratives, whereas Pakistani media emphasized humanitarian concerns, political grievances, and the broader Kashmir dispute. The research further examines the role of digital media platforms in accelerating narrative dissemination, amplifying polarization, and facilitating the contestation of competing interpretations. Findings suggest that media narratives function as strategic instruments of influence that shape threat perceptions, legitimize policy responses, and reinforce national identities. The study contributes to the growing literature on information warfare by demonstrating how strategic storytelling has become a critical dimension of contemporary conflict communication and regional geopolitical competition in South Asia.

Keywords: Narrative Warfare, Media Framing, Strategic Narratives, Conflict Communication, Media System.

Introduction

The Pahalgam incident is important within this larger picture where it is worthwhile examining in detail how mechanisms of 'narrative warfare' and 'media framing' can be analysed. The area of the incident is a geopolitically sensitive region and over the years, the events have often been a source of tensions, resulting in heated media coverage and discussions about it. The conflicting narratives were expressed in the Indian, Pakistani and international news media with interpretative frameworks and agendas of their respective kinds. These stories not only told the narrative, but actively participated in the significance of the event and the different ways other groups construed it, and how it was put to work in more overall political debates. A construction of the incident in the Indian media was mostly built in the paradigm of "security" with focus on the conceptualisation of the event as "terrorism", "national

sovereignty” and the “legitimacy of state action”. This contextualisation was used to help sell this event as the continuation of a struggle against the foreigners, and as a story of national perseverance and protection. In contrast, the Pakistani media was more prone to portray it as part of an ongoing political battle and human rights crisis and emphasized certain salient points such as the impact on civilians, violation of human rights, and the historical facts about the Kashmir conflict. International media outlets are more careful and balanced, but they also helped to spread these stories as well, in some cases given it more power and, in some cases, it mediated. Deconstructing these constructions of the narrative reveals the extent of the political, institutional and ideological influences in the media constructions of the narrative. Key actors of this process are political forces which can push and shape media agendas and public imagination with the aid of strategic communication. Through politicians' official statement, press conference, and rhetorical maneuvering, they try to establish "ground rules" of the debate and establish an authority to interpret the events. Media are particularly reliant on such sources, especially with regard to matters that have to do with national security, so that it produces the reproduction of mostly elite discourses and marginalization of other discourses. This is even more accentuated by the functions of State institutions that control and spread information, which affects the availability and credibility of information sources. In the meantime there are further complexities introduced by the international media and the internet. The international media are regulated by other institutional and normative orders which can foster the adoption of other types of framing practices centered on non-partisanship, verification and international values. However, these narratives are not in isolation, they are part of a local-textured discourses and in many instances transformed by national enclosures. Internet media are in turn likely to facilitate rapid dissemination and / or amplification of narratives, which either serve as a reinforcement of dominant framings, or help to construct counter-narratives. A discursive space is created which is polyphonic, antagonistic and unstable. A theoretical approach that involves the discipline of media, political communication and International relations is required to gain understanding of such dynamics. With the help of the framing theory, it can be analyzed to give it a meaning and the narrative theory, which concentrates on understanding the effects of story telling techniques on the generating of a political reality, can serve as a basis. Theorists within the field of international relations also argue that ideas, identities and discourse can be important factors in shaping the nature of state action and relations, as in the case of constructivist theories. Together these two perspectives enable conducting an elaborate study of the use of narrative as a power in the Indo-Pakistan conflict. The axis of the interdisciplinarity and the objective of researching the work of "narrative warfare" in a specific and empirical context are placed here. Focusing upon the Pahalgam incident, it aims to provide a fine-grained and multifaceted analysis of the different layers of media framing, political communication and institutional practices that play over each other to shape the meaning of conflict events. By so doing, it adds to the larger discussions of the role of media in modern war, the essence of symbolic power and the potential of more responsible and constructive communications. The importance of this research lies not only from the academic interests, but also from practical aspects of Media ethics, media policy making and conflict management. Media literacy critical analysis of media narratives – is a key skill to become an informed citizen and good

governance in these days of fast, ubiquitous and often controversial media flows. It will provide understanding about how narratives can be constructed and how they propagate that can be used as input in the current effort to establish transparency, accountability and balance in media activities. In addition, it highlights the need for strategic communication activities towards de-escalation and dialogue and avoiding polarization and confrontation. In conclusion, the transformation of the nature of conflict in multi-dimensional approach both in physical and symbolic aspects emphasizes the importance of studying in narrative warfare and media framing. That's a case which is ripe for such an analysis, especially the Indo-Pakistan conflict which has its roots in the past and complex political process. In this sense, the Pahalgam incident can be an example of how narratives can be constructed, disputed and utilized in order to attain a political goal as a modern instance. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the growing awareness of the importance of communication that can facilitate the emergence of a conflict and to examine how to improve and make communication more responsible in the media atmosphere. To better grasp the nature of narrative warfare as an aspect of contemporary warfare, it can be contextualised on more broadly drawn theory and epistemology of the production/conquest of meaning in the international system. The overall constructivist paradigm of IR is particularly pertinent in this regard as it focuses on the importance of ideas, discourse and mutually recognized meanings in fashioning the reality in international politics rather than merely pointing at material resources. Identities and interests of states are not given, but rather constantly produced during the interaction- and communication process. Therefore, narratives can be seen as the constitution of the political reality as these narratives are the means by which actors relate to themselves, their adversaries and the nature of the conflict they are engaged in. In the context of the Indo-Pakistan crisis constructivist knowledge, is born around the question of how identity and historical memories are engrained in discourses which govern political action in the present. It is not just the north-south partition of 1947 was a geopolitical event, but also a historic event that had produced alternate national identities and was motivated by contrasting visions of ideology. These identities are not only preserved but also reproduced by decades of discursive practices which put the media in the foreground as the supporter and endorser of collective memory and as the creator of masses' consciousness. Events in relation to conflict are therefore rarely experienced as singular, but are experienced within a story – the nature of how they can be understood and responded to can therefore be predetermined in this manner. Embeddedness accounts for this national variation in the meanings as the same events would be translated into vastly different meanings in each of the national settings, while the social actors would develop their own ideas or meanings from the same event through their individual stories. Intimately connected with constructivism is a notion of agenda-setting that emphasizes the power of the media to not only shape what people think, but what they think about. Media organizations determine the salience of issues within the discourse by prioritizing some of their issues, themes, and perspectives. During a conflict situation, the agenda-setting process is especially important because it defines the elements of an event that will be significant and those that are pushed to the background. As an example, the focus on security in one media system and humanitarian in another indicates a not only editorial, but also political and ideological agenda. Such priorities tend to be in line

with the state interests thus leading to a point of convergence between media agendas and the official policy positions. The propaganda model also compliments this analysis by giving structural explanation on how the relationship between media and power can be explained. In this model, the media institutions have various economic, politic and organizational constraints that influence the output of media. Ownership, pressure upon ads, the sourcing system and/or ideological filters all help to shape the content of what is generated and broadcasted. The need to rely on official sources is especially acute in the framework of the topic of national security, as journalists are dependent on governmental and military bodies to inform them. This dependency might lead to a reproductive discourse of the official version as this would limit the diversity of perspectives and help reproduce dominant frames. Whilst the backgrounds and framework of Indian and Pakistani media are different, the structures can be noticed in the convergence of the media with national interests. India and Pakistan media systems might also give some clues to the issue of the construction of narratives.

Literature review:

The media framing is one of the most powerful theoretical frameworks of analyzing the manner in which conflicts are discussed, perceived and accepted in societies. Framing paradigm is based on the assumption that media do not simply reflect reality but create it in the course of selection, emphasis and the exclusion. During conflict situations these processes take on even greater importance, with the audiences extensively depending on mediated data to make meaning out of events that are complex, far and emotionally charged. Literature has indicated that media framing and conflict communication have the power to shape the way people think of conflicts, in addition to what they think about them; this is on what is considered legitimate, responsible, moral, and what ought to be the policy response (Entman, 1993). Intellectual ancestry of framing theory could be linked to the works of Goffman (1974), who developed a frame analysis conceptualization in terms of which the interpretation of social experiences by individuals is directed by structures of cognition. Framing became a mediator between sociological view of meaning-making and psychological study of processing information in the media studies field. The formulation by Entman (1993) is still the leading one, and framing is described as the inclusion of specific elements of perceived reality in order to advance certain problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral judgments, and treatment suggestions. This definition has gained a lot of popularity in the study of conflict communication because it represents both the discursive and normative aspects of media reporting. Global Scholars of conflict framing has identified the media as the primary participants in the discourse of war. The initial research on the Vietnam War indicated the role of the media in framing that affected the thinking of citizens and political authority and disproved the belief that media simply relay the official points of view (Hallin, 1986). Further studies on the conflict situations in Balkans, Middle East and Afghanistan showed later on that media frames frequently corresponded with the national interests, thus supporting the narratives of the states during the times of crisis. This correspondence is especially pronounced in the nations that are highly nationalistic or volatile in terms of national security, in which the dissenting frames are excluded or disenfranchised. One such theme evident in the literature is the preeminence of the conflict frame in war reporting. The conflict frame puts a lot of stress on violence, confrontation, and zero-sum results, and conflicts are a

contest between two opposing parties, with clearly defined winners and losers. Although it appeals to the audience and meets the news value of drama and immediacy, the critics state that such a frame simplifies the realities in the political sphere, as well as it leads to a polarized thinking (Neuman et al., 1992). In conflict zones, such framing tends to make the actors stereotypes, heroes, villains, victims, therefore, concealing structural causes and other ways of thinking. Intimately connected with the conflict frame is the responsibility frame, which shifts blame of violence on to particular actors, which are usually foreign enemies or non-state organizations. Studies indicate that responsibility framing is an important aspect of influencing the attitudes of the people on the issue of military intervention and foreign policy. Iyengar (1991) makes a difference between episodic and thematic framing, where episodic frames dwelled on particular events and urged viewers to attribute blame to a person or a group, thematic frames dwelled on a greater context and induced systemic perceptions. Episodic framing is more dominant in conflict communication, which supports the simplistic causal accounts, with the restriction of critical interaction with root causes. Another outstanding characteristic of the conflict reporting is the morality frame especially when it comes to the conflict that is viewed as a battle between good and evil. Researchers believe that moral framing justifies violence by making it acceptable or justified that is, when it is supported by national or religious values. In the post-9/11 period, moral frames emerged as the subject of global debate regarding the issue of terrorism, whereby the conflicts are often discussed as life-or-death struggles against ideological attacks. This source emphasizes the fact that moral framing leaves less room to negotiate and compromise since opponents are developed as morally illegitimate or even immoral.

The ambivalent position of human-interest framing, which brings conflict into personal lives and makes it meaningful by presenting a suffering or a heroic story, is not a recent invention of the literature. On the one hand, this kind of framing may create empathy and make distant conflicts more human; on the other hand, this may be used selectively to bolster in-group identification and dehumanize out-groups. Research on conflict reporting reveals that the frames of human interest are regularly unequally allocated, as the victims of the home country receive more emotional nuances in comparison with the representatives of the opponent side (Moeller, 2002). This imbalance is a source of disparate human life assessment, as well as national prejudice. Much of the literature goes against mainstream conflict reporting using the war and peace journalism aspects. According to Galtung (2006), war journalism favors violence and elite sources and immediate events, but peace journalism aims at framing conflicts, non-violence, and marginal voices. In consistent empirical research on various contexts, it is always observed that the media war journalism prevails in the mainstream media, especially when they are in acute crisis. Scholars have blamed this preeminence to structural forces like commercial demands, dependency on official sources and professional practices that emphasizes on short term over deep. Media globalization has brought about new dimensions to the conflict framing research. Transnational news channels and web platforms facilitate the spread of stories across borders at very high rates, shaping the international views of conflicts. The work of global media framing has indicated that the media in the West tends to frame conflicts in the Global South based on the instability, extremism, or humanitarian crisis, which is an orientalist assumption and geopolitical

interests (Said, 1981). This can change international community's responses, whether in the form of humanitarian intervention, sanctions or even diplomatic interaction, and this goes to show that the implications of the framing of the media can be far-reaching internationally. As well, conflict communication dynamics have been complicated in the digital media sphere. The social platform allows the people to circumvent the conventional gatekeepers, and produces and disseminates frames that might challenge or lend to the dominant frames. A decentralisation which, explains scholars, has contributed to the multiplication of framing contests due to the battle of the different actors to define meaning in real-time (Chadwick, 2017). Nevertheless, the literature also shows that algorithmic curation tends to boost emotionally charged and polarizing frames aggravating misinformation and narrative disintegration. These dynamics have the potential to increase the tensions during conflict situations and destabilize the conflict resolution efforts. The other major branch of the literature looks at how journalistic norms and professional cultures influence the conflict frames. Comparative analysis shows that journalistic practices are largely different in different countries, based on politics, media ownership, and the regulation of the media. Commercial imperative and contest by other media houses tend to generate sensationalized framing in liberal democracies, and in more authoritarian media systems, state authority tends to have a more direct impact on determining narratives. Nevertheless, scholars observe that conflict framing converges in a lot of situations irrespective of the context, more so, there is the tendency of giving preference to elite sources and national views. Media framing and its association with the opinion of the population remains a critical issue in conflict communication studies. The results obtained using the experimental and survey-based studies prove that issues related to exposure to various frames can have a substantial effect on the attitude towards military action, negotiating process, and reconciliation. Conflict frame is prone to promoting punitive policies, thematic and peace-oriented frame have higher likelihood of promoting openness to diplomatic solutions (de Vreese, 2005). These results stress the normative importance of media framing since the editorial decisions of journalists may influence the policy direction indirectly due to their impact on societal moods. The literature has recognized constraints in framing research, notwithstanding the large number of Scholars. Opponents of the framing effects claim that they are often based on the context like previous beliefs, political ideology, and media trust. Consequently, framing does not work in a vacuum but it relates to larger discursive spaces. Also, there are ongoing methodological discussions on how to measure frames and their impacts with an increasing demand to employ more longitudinal and mixed-methods to understand the dynamic aspect of conflict communication. In general, international sources on media framing and conflict communication prove that media do not just sit back and watch the conflict but rather they take part in meaning-making processes that influence the public perception and political result. By influencing and supporting power relations, national interests, and cultural assumptions, framing practices are evident and especially in moments of crisis. These observations offer a critical base to understand the functioning of media framing in particular regional settings, including South Asia, where the historical animosities, national identities and the changing formations of the media landscapes collide to generate particular pattern of narratives. These international theoretical and empirical arguments are important in

placing the further discussion of media coverage in Indo-Pakistan and the framing of particular events like the Pahalgam attack in the wider area of conflict communication Scholars.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Discuss the aspects of narration of war in the incident of Pahalgam.
2. Come up with strategic storytelling techniques of Indian and Pakistani media.
3. Make comparisons of the pattern of the narrative construction in both media systems.
4. Understand how digital and traditional media can be used to magnify strategic messaging.
5. Make contribution with regard to theoretical aspects of information warfare in the South Asia region.

Research Questions

1. How was Pahalgam incident rhetorically framed through Indian and Pakistani media?
2. How was public opinion formed through storytelling?
3. How are competing narratives a reflection of broader geopolitical strategies?
4. How did digital platforms contribute to the spread of narrative warfare?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative comparative case study approach was used.

Data Sources

- Television news coverage
- Print media reports
- Digital news portals

The study uses:

- Narrative analysis
- Framing analysis
- Discourse analysis

Theoretical Framework

The Strategic Narrative Theory (state-driven storytelling) will be introduced and discussed. Selection of the media, and emphasis of information, is achieved through Framing Theory. All these frameworks are about the structuring, dissemination and normalisation of narratives in conflictual settings.

Findings and Analysis

Tracing the concept of 'Narrative Architecture' in Indian Media

The discourses in the Indian media about the Pahalgam incident were marked by securitisation, mobilisation of emotions, and patriotic narration.

Securitized Storytelling

The prevailing narrative was that the incident was a part of the terrorism and national security threat narrative. This framing emphasized:

- External enemy construction
- Cross-border linkage assumptions

- Seasonality and climatic conditions of the emergency
- The story development was in the format of a predictable sequence:
Attack, threat identification, enemy attribution and call for action.

Emotional Mobilization

There was a significant use of emotional story telling in television and digital media:

- Victim-centered narratives
- Visual dramatization
- Moral absolutes (right vs wrong)

“This emotional frame made it easy to get people involved and to feel like they were all in the same team.”

Heroic State Narrative

The State became a protector, the role of which was to provide security and justice. The narrative arcs were filled in with responses from the government as pivotal and essential.

The role of Narrative Architecture in media of Pakistan

The Pakistani media produced alternative narratives that were based on scepticism, diplomacy and dispute with the narratives.

Counter-Framing Strategy

The Pakistani media gave rise to a lot of questions:

- Evidence reliability
- Attribution claims
- Timelines of reporting

This led to an epistemic frame of uncertainties.

Diplomatic Storytelling

The main story line was about:

- De-escalation
- International law
- Bilateral dialogue

A consistent meta-narrative was that there was structural bias in the global and regional media which invariably framed Pakistan in the context of conflict.

Digital amplification and algorithmic escalation.

Digital platforms have been an important tool in spreading narrative warfare by:

- Hashtag-driven polarization
- Viral video dissemination
- Influencer commentary ecosystems
- Meme-based political communication

Emotional framing was amplified, and space for neutral discussion decreased, through algorithmic amplification.

Comparative Narrative Mapping

Table 1: Narrative Orientation Comparison

Dimension	Indian Narrative System	Pakistani Narrative System
Core Narrative	Security & Patriotism	Diplomacy & Contestation
Tone	Emotional / Assertive	Analytical / Skeptical
Enemy Construction	Strong externalization	Conditional attribution
State Role	Protective hero	Defensive actor
Media Alignment	High state convergence	Mixed alignment

Table 2: Strategic Storytelling Techniques

Technique	Indian Media	Pakistani Media
Emotional framing	High	Moderate
Historical referencing	High	Moderate
Evidentiary skepticism	Low	High
Moral polarization	High	Low
Diplomatic emphasis	Low	High

Table 3: Narrative Warfare Functions

Function	India	Pakistan
Domestic mobilization	Strong	Moderate
International signaling	Strong	Moderate
Threat construction	High	Low–Moderate
Narrative resistance	Low	High

Narrative Warfare Dynamics

The Pahalgam incident is an example of three key aspects of narrative warfare:

1. Narrative Construction

Both sides built up coherent narratives consistent with the national security doctrines.

2. Narrative Contestation

There were conflicting causal explanations, attributions of responsibility, and interpretations.

3. Narrative Stabilization

As time passed, stories became solidified in national media, confirming existing ideologies.

Discussion

The results show that narrative warfare can no longer be viewed as a side-branch of warfare, but as an integral part of the conflict between India and Pakistan in the present day. The Pahalgam incident is a telling example of the role played by the media systems as actors instead of being observers.

Narrative construction is closely related with interests of the State, interests of the institution and psychology of the audience. Emotional storytelling can help to heighten engagement and can help to enhance polarization. On the other hand, diplomatic framing is oriented towards preventing escalation, but is not necessarily very emotional in domestic areas.

It is in the digital space that these dynamics are heightened with faster circulation of the narrative and shorter verification cycles.

Conclusion

The Pahalgam incident is a good case study on narrative warfare of South Asia. It shows that contemporary conflicts are more and more waged in the form of stories, interpretations and mediated realities as opposed to just physical confrontation.

Strategic storytelling was done both in India and Pakistan, to influence perceptions and validate policy responses. These alternative narratives affected the information environment, which was polarised, such that the truth was neglected and told in a way that made sense of the narrative.

In conclusion the study suggests that minds won outside the frontiers is now an integral part of the statecraft and narrative warfare has become a hallmark of today's Indo-Pak relations.

References

- Ahmed, R., & Pisiou, D. (2020). *Information warfare and strategic narratives in the digital age: The case of South Asia*. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(6), 1350–1370.
- Banerjee, S. (2012). *War and media in South Asia: Re-imagining the nation in Indian and Pakistani television*. Routledge.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Galtung, J. (2002). *Peace Journalism*.
- Herman, E. & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent*.
- Khan, M., & Yusuf, H. (2020). *Media, narratives and conflict: Framing the Pulwama-Balakot episode*. Islamabad Policy Institute.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic Narratives*.
- Rajagopal, A. (2009). *Politics after television: Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the Indian public*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shah, H. (2010). *Journalism and ideology during conflict: A study of Pakistani media*. *Media, War & Conflict*, 3(1), 46–65.
- Thussu, D. K. (2007). *News as entertainment: The rise of global infotainment*. SAGE Publications.