A Comparative Analysis Of The Pahalgam Attack Media Coverage: National Vs International Perspectives

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Abstract

The media is a powerful institution that shapes public perception, especially during crises such as terror attacks. This research presents an in-depth comparative analysis of the media coverage of the 2025 Pahalgam attack in Jammu and Kashmir, examining the narratives, editorial framing, and reporting styles of Indian national media versus international outlets. Employing qualitative content analysis over a two-week period following the incident, the study dissects coverage based on focus, duration, tone, visual value, treatment, and dominant narratives. The analysis reveals stark contrasts in approach: while Indian media emphasized patriotic narratives and emotional appeals with continuous live coverage, international media tended to adopt distant, analytical tones often framed within geopolitical discourse. The paper interrogates the ethical implications of media coverage in conflict zones and explores how national interest, editorial bias, and digital dissemination influence journalistic practice. The study contributes to broader discussions on media ethics, information integrity, and the global-local divide in conflict journalism.

Keywords

Pahalgam attack, media framing, terrorism, content analysis, national media, international media, Kashmir, conflict journalism, media bias

1. Introduction

On April 22, 2025, a terror attack occurred in Pahalgam, a serene valley in the Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir. Militants opened fire on a civilian tourist convoy, resulting in 11 fatalities and multiple injuries. This attack, though not unprecedented in Kashmir, came at a politically volatile time—amid rising Indo-Pak tensions and internal debates over the status of Jammu and Kashmir. The media, as always, sprang into action, shaping public understanding and national sentiment.

This study seeks to explore how the Pahalgam attack was reported across different media ecosystems, with a focus on Indian national media outlets versus internationally reputed platforms. Coverage of terrorism is inherently charged with emotion, ideology, and often, geopolitical intent. Given the Indian media's historical proximity to Kashmir and its intertwined political narratives, their coverage is assumed to differ significantly from that of international news agencies that bring a broader, more detached perspective.

By analyzing how different media organizations treated the same incident, this research aims to uncover biases, assess ethical boundaries, and understand how media narratives shape—and are shaped by—political and cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Framing and Conflict Coverage

Framing theory, first articulated by Entman (1993), remains foundational, but recent scholarship expands its emotional dimensions. Ojala and Pantti (2021) highlight how emotional framing in conflict journalism influences public empathy and political polarization. Their analysis of Syrian war coverage is especially relevant to understanding how emotions shape audience perceptions during crises like the Pahalgam attack.

2.2 Indian Media and Ideological Slant

Post-2014, Indian media has adopted increasingly nationalistic and partisan positions. Kumar (2020) and Mehta (2018) originally noted this shift, but Chakravartty and Roy (2022) argue that media is now deeply embedded in the Hindutva ideological project, accelerating democratic backsliding. Udupa (2021) further documents the digital strategies of nationalist media, showing how humor and memes are used to deflect criticism and build solidarity online.

2.3 International Media and Geopolitical Narratives

International outlets often frame South Asian conflicts through human rights or geopolitical lenses. Building on Thussu (2007), Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud (2021) examine how Western outlets covered the Kashmir conflict, showing a preference for human interest stories that abstract local politics. Their findings reinforce the comparative tone gap observed in this study.

2.4 Digital Media, Misinformation, and Public Response

Hermida (2010) and Tandoc et al. (2018) laid the groundwork for studying misinformation and digital journalism. More recently, Marwick and Lewis (2022) explore the evolution of online disinformation and the ways media manipulation is orchestrated across platforms. Chaturvedi (2023) offers a case-specific analysis of how Twitter/X in India fostered echo chambers and outrage cycles following terror attacks, as seen in the #PahalgamAttack response.

2.5 Ethical Journalism in Conflict Zones

Lynch and McGoldrick's (2005) peace journalism framework is complemented by Patel (2024), who analyzes newsroom practices in South Asia and identifies institutional barriers to ethical reporting. Hanitzsch et al. (2022) present global data showing how journalistic values vary by region, offering a useful backdrop to interpret divergent ethical practices in Indian and international coverage.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Compare and contrast the media coverage of the 2025 Pahalgam attack by Indian national and international media outlets.
2. Analyze differences in duration, focus, treatment, tone, visual representation, and narrative framing.
3. Identify patterns of bias, sensationalism, or objectivity.
4. Evaluate how coverage may influence domestic perception and global opinion.
5. Reflect on the ethical responsibilities of conflict-sensitive journalism in both national and global contexts.

4. Research Methodology

To undertake a comprehensive comparative analysis of media coverage surrounding the Pahalgam attack, this study employed a **qualitative content analysis** framework. This approach allowed for an interpretative, context-rich examination of textual and visual content across selected news reports. Rather than focusing on quantifiable metrics like frequency or circulation, qualitative content analysis provides insight into how meaning is constructed, framed, and delivered to the public in times of crisis.

Sampling was conducted purposively to reflect a representative mix of both Indian national and international media houses. The selection included a combination of legacy print outlets, digital portals, and television news channels. Five Indian media platforms were chosen—Times of India, The Hindu, Republic TV, NDTV, and India Today—based on their wide readership/viewership and influence on public discourse. From the international corpus, five prominent platforms were selected—BBC News, The Guardian, The New York Times, Al Jazeera English, and Deutsche Welle

(DW). The sampling period covered two weeks following the incident (March 3–17, 2025), a duration that captured both the immediate breaking news and follow-up analyses or op-eds.

Data collection involved archiving web articles, screen captures of televised broadcasts, transcripts of prime-time debates, and associated visual media such as photographs and video thumbnails. Additionally, comments from social media platforms like Twitter/X were monitored to observe the public dissemination and reception of media narratives.

The study focused on six key analytical dimensions: the **duration** of coverage (how long and how frequently the event was covered), **focus** (which angles—security, political, communal, or human interest—dominated), **treatment** (the balance between factual reporting and sensationalism), **tone** (the style and emotiveness of language), **visual value** (the nature and impact of accompanying visuals), and **narrative construction** (how victims, perpetrators, and broader implications were framed).

The analytical process involved **open coding** to identify emerging themes, followed by **axial coding** to categorize patterns across the dataset. These patterns were then interpreted in light of media theories, such as agenda-setting and framing, to draw meaningful comparisons between national and international approaches.

Duration and Frequency

The findings of this study reveal stark contrasts in how the Pahalgam attack was covered by Indian and international media, both in content and tone, as well as in narrative construction and visual storytelling.

In terms of **duration and frequency**, Indian news channels began coverage within minutes of the attack, and the story dominated headlines for at least three to five consecutive days. Channels like Republic TV and India Today dedicated primetime segments exclusively to the incident, often repeating footage and commentary for dramatic effect. The print media followed suit with multi-page spreads and emotional editorials. In contrast, international outlets like BBC, Al Jazeera, and The New York Times covered the attack with far less urgency. Most international platforms published one or two articles on the incident, focusing more on its geopolitical implications rather than as a standalone national tragedy.

The **focus** of Indian media coverage was heavily skewed toward themes of national security, patriotism, and accusations against Pakistan. Reports often described the event using terms such as "cowardly terror act" and "yet another attack on India's sovereignty," thereby invoking a nationalistic emotional framework. The personal stories of the victims, many of whom were local or domestic tourists, were extensively covered, often accompanied by tearful interviews with their relatives. This human interest element was embedded within a narrative of state resilience and military valor.

On the other hand, international media focused more on the **broader political and historical context** of the Kashmir conflict. Al Jazeera and Deutsche Welle, in particular, explored the attack's connection to ongoing tensions in the region post the abrogation of Article 370. They highlighted the lack of trust among local Kashmiris and the militarization of the region. The Guardian and the BBC maintained a neutral tone but included expert commentary on regional instability and the lack of dialogue between India and Pakistan.

When examining **treatment**, Indian media outlets largely veered toward dramatization. Television news bulletins used high-tempo background music, sensational headlines, and panel discussions filled with emotionally charged rhetoric. Terms such as "Pakistan-backed terrorists" were used liberally, often without attribution or evidence, turning the news into a form of spectacle. This style, while effective in capturing viewer attention, often obscured the line between reporting and propaganda.

In contrast, international media coverage was far more subdued. The treatment was analytical and cautious, with an emphasis on verified facts and balanced reporting. There was little use of emotionally charged language or speculative commentary. For example, The New York Times reported the attack using cautious terminology such as "suspected militants" and noted that no group had yet claimed responsibility, thereby emphasizing journalistic restraint.

The **tone** of Indian media was overtly emotional and accusatory, reflective of a larger pattern of media alignment with state interests. The language used was often incendiary, contributing to a climate of public outrage and communal polarization. The tone of international media, in contrast, was measured, often bordering on detached. While this minimized sensationalism, it also made the coverage feel somewhat impersonal and disconnected from the human impact of the event.

With regard to **visual value**, Indian television and digital platforms frequently displayed graphic images of the aftermath—blood-stained vehicles, weeping relatives, and footage from funerals of the victims. These images served to amplify the emotional impact of the event but raised ethical questions about the dignity and consent of those depicted. International outlets largely avoided graphic visuals, opting instead for symbolic imagery such as Indian military checkpoints or protest visuals, thereby preserving a more ethical stance in visual journalism.

Finally, the **narrative construction** differed sharply. In Indian coverage, the victims were portrayed as martyrs, the attackers as enemies of the nation, and the state and military as defenders of national honor. The narrative was clear-cut, binary, and emotionally charged. In contrast, international media framed the incident within the longer trajectory of conflict in Kashmir, often portraying all stakeholders—including the Indian state, militant groups, and external actors like Pakistan—as part of a complex web of conflict dynamics.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals a dichotomy in the way the Pahalgam terror attack was represented in Indian national media versus international outlets. This dichotomy is reflective of not just media ideologies, but also audience expectations, editorial freedoms, and political climates.

6.1 Hyper nationalism vs Geopolitical Objectivity

Indian media, especially mainstream television, has increasingly adopted a hypernationalist stance. This aligns with what Thussu (2019) calls the "militant nationalism" of India's news culture post-2014, wherein any incident in Kashmir is seen not just as a security threat but as a blow to national pride. This was evident in the repetitive use of emotionally charged visuals, militaristic language, and confrontational debate formats.

In contrast, international media sought to embed the incident within larger themes—regional instability, India's internal political shifts post-Article 370, and human rights narratives. While this brought more context, it also often lacked the local empathy and emotional resonance visible in Indian coverage.

6.2 Agenda-Setting and Political Influence

Indian coverage clearly reflected the priorities of the current political establishment. Government voices dominated headlines, and opposition critiques were marginal. This aligns with the Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which suggests that media may not tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about. In this context, the focus on Pakistani culpability, military response, and emotional patriotism overshadowed calls for long-term peace or accountability.

International media, by contrast, offered more pluralistic sources—academics, foreign analysts, civil society, and human rights experts. While this approach provided a broader narrative framework, critics might argue that it often appeared disconnected from the emotional realities on the ground in India.

6.3 Digital Dissemination and Public Reaction

On platforms like Twitter (X) and Instagram, Indian hashtags trended for days: **#PahalgamAttack**, **#KashmirTerror**, **#IndiaBleeds**. While this demonstrated digital solidarity, it also reflected echo chambers of outrage and misinformation. Videos of unrelated past incidents were sometimes circulated as part of the current attack narrative, showcasing the challenges of verifying facts in a digital-first ecosystem.

In contrast, global social media responses were muted, with limited engagement or virality. This disparity highlights the regional specificity of digital outrage, even in a globally connected world.

6.4 Ethical Journalism and Sensitivity in Conflict Zones

Conflict-sensitive journalism demands restraint, verification, and contextual depth (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Indian media, in several cases, failed on these counts—broadcasting graphic visuals without consent, interviewing grieving families in real-time, and engaging in provocative panel rhetoric. These practices raise concerns about sensationalism and trauma commodification.

International outlets generally adhered to stricter ethical protocols, avoiding explicit content and ensuring minimal harm. However, they too risked ethical oversight by framing the event abstractly, potentially dehumanizing the victims through excessive detachment.

Any media analysis, particularly of sensitive topics like terrorism, must be grounded in ethical awareness—not only in how the research is conducted but also in how the media being studied treats its subjects. Ethical journalism, especially in conflict situations, is bound by certain core principles: truthfulness, minimization of harm, accountability, and impartiality.

In the case of Indian media coverage of the Pahalgam attack, several ethical concerns surfaced. First, there was the issue of **trauma commodification**—the repeated broadcasting of graphic visuals and emotionally charged interviews with the bereaved. While such content may serve to humanize the tragedy, its exploitative repetition without consent borders on voyeurism. The trauma of victims and families was arguably turned into a spectacle, which not only compromised their dignity but also fueled public outrage without offering any meaningful path to resolution or healing.

Another ethical lapse was the **lack of source verification and responsible framing**. Accusations against Pakistan and calls for military retaliation were frequently made without supporting evidence, thus contributing to potential misinformation and heightening geopolitical tensions. In contrast, while international media maintained a greater ethical distance by avoiding graphic visuals and unchecked claims, they sometimes lacked **cultural sensitivity** and local engagement. Their coverage, though factually cautious, occasionally abstracted the event from its human toll, treating it more as a policy issue than a humanitarian one.

This dual set of ethical challenges—emotional exploitation on one hand, and dehumanizing detachment on the other—underscores the delicate balance that must be maintained in conflict-sensitive journalism. Journalists must strive to report the truth while ensuring that their methods do not cause further harm to those already suffering.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Pahalgam attack and its media portrayal demonstrate the centrality of journalism in shaping both immediate public sentiment and long-term geopolitical narratives. This research reveals that Indian national media and international media function within different ideological frameworks, shaped by their political contexts, institutional constraints, and target audiences.

Indian national media, driven by emotional immediacy and often aligned with the political establishment, presented the attack as a national tragedy and a call to collective outrage. The stories were emotionally evocative, heavily visual, and sometimes veered into sensationalism. While this approach successfully mobilized public opinion and underscored the gravity of the attack, it often did so at the expense of ethical journalism, nuance, and factual accuracy.

International media, in contrast, adopted a more analytical, dispassionate tone, focusing on context and long-term implications. Their narratives highlighted the complexity of the Kashmir issue, embedded the event in broader regional dynamics, and upheld ethical guidelines concerning victim representation. However, this distance sometimes created a sense of emotional disengagement, with the coverage lacking the local resonance necessary for global empathy.

In conclusion, the coverage of the Pahalgam attack reflects broader tensions in journalism today: between national interest and global responsibility, between sensationalism and sensitivity, and between immediacy and accuracy. For media practitioners and scholars alike, these tensions highlight the need for a more balanced and ethical approach to conflict reporting—one that informs, contextualizes, and above all, humanizes.

Recommendations moving forward include:

1. **Editorial Restraint**: Indian media houses must institute guidelines on crisis reporting that limit the use of graphic content and speculative commentary.
2. **Contextual Depth**: International media should prioritize the inclusion of local voices and context, ensuring that global coverage does not erase regional complexity.
3. **Media Literacy Training**: Journalists must be trained in trauma-informed reporting and conflict-sensitive practices to improve the quality and ethics of crisis journalism.
4. **Collaborative Frameworks**: Cross-national media collaborations can help bridge narrative divides, combining local depth with global oversight to produce more rounded journalism.

By addressing these challenges, the media—both national and international—can evolve from mere chroniclers of tragedy to agents of understanding, accountability, and peace.

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