

Coverage of Syrian Conflict in the International Print Media: A Review

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on framing, portrayal, coverage and sourcing this content analysis seeks to explore how select top international newspapers covered, presented and constructed the Syrian conflict for the readers around the world. The select international English dailies include The Guardian, The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Sydney Morning Herald, China Daily, and The Times of India for the reference period of ten days. The aim of the study is to unfold the Syrian crisis, with the help of news stories and editorials published on the various pages of the sample selected. The findings reveal that, stories pertaining to the Syrian conflict focused on the chemical attacks while editorials advocated the early US intervention post chemical attack. The stories and editorials had combination of both thematic and episodic frames and “chemical attack” was the dominant frame in both news stories and editorials. Majority of the sample gave a good coverage to Syrian conflict and was portrayed as pseudo positive. China Daily had negative frames manifested in both news stories and editorials. The International print media could have done better at covering the Syrian conflict comprehensively and attempted a solution driven understanding of the complexity of the crisis. There is much scope for further studies to help build a real understanding of the conflict through several media platforms.

KEYWORDS: *Arab Spring, Chemical attack, Outrage, Responsibility, Russian intervention, US intervention, War crimes, Civilian killing*

1. Introduction

Syrian civil war started in 2011 as a part of the movement known as “Arab Spring” in the earliest days when it swept across the Middle East. Tunisia was the first country to feel the effect of organized comprehensive public demonstrations, which pondered Tunisia to put together changes in the elected government by going for re-election in 2010. In 2011, Egypt was the second country engulfed by the Arab Spring; protesters demanded President Hosni Mubarak to step down with immediate effect. This wave then took over Libya, Jordan, Sudan and parts of North Africa e.g. Nigeria and Mauritania (Gupta, 2015).

Egyptians managed to oust the existing government and replaced it with hardliner Muslim Brotherhood (AFP,Cairo, 2013). There are many theories as to when the protests actually started in Syria. According to Al-Jazeera (2018), these protests

actually began in the middle phase of the March 2011 (Al-Jazeera , 2018). ‘Initially, Protests were peaceful for few days but on March, 18 security forces opened unprovoked fire killing four protesters and injuring many more in the action’ (BBC, 2011). ‘On March 19, the semi armed conflict transformed into full-fledged civil war’ (BBC, 2017). Since then there was no point of return for Syria anymore; civilians had picked up arms against Assad regime. Ever since they became “Rebels” and in contrast Assad became dictator and force of evil (Al-Jazeera , 2018).

According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) this is “the most expensive civil war to be fought anywhere in the world”. Civilians are paying the “Highest Price” in the Syrian war that has passed eight years and is still going on (Xinhua News, 2019).

1.1 Death Ratio of this conflict

As per the United Nations report in April (2016) Syria’s civil war has resulted in 4,00,000 deaths including women and children (UNHCR, 2017). Till 2018, the number of deaths stood at 5,00,000. In addition, more than 5.6 million people are officially registered, as refugees (UNHCR, September 2018). The registered refugees with (UN) are 408464, which is just an estimated 13% of total account. According to the report compiled by Shams Al-Shakrachi 50 million children, uprooted from schools worldwide, combine 45% from Syria and Afghanistan alone. Syria alone has 2.1 million children aged between five and seventeen who are out of the school and additional 6,00,000 children are living in refugee camps without access to any kind of education.

Syria’s border lies with five other Arab countries such as, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq. This makes Syria vulnerable with so many diverse cultures and faiths intermingling in one nation. This is exactly what happened in 2011 when majority Sunnis did not want minority yet powerful group to exercise their power anymore. This is was the root cause of “Syrian Civil War”. Many other countries did manage to oust non-favorable governments with political reforms except Syria (Mark, 2017).

1.2 The Impact of Conflict

Conflict has both positive as well as negative impact. Conflict is the most dangerous form of interaction between humans, it causes disharmony in the social order and disrupts the unity of the people of any state. Not only does it affect the political, social and religious institutions but economical too, the most affected human prospect is development as it hampers and decreases the growth rate of the society, men and machine become idle and useless (Pranav, 2018).

1.3 Representation of Syrian Conflict in Media

The main aim of this study is to understand the representation of the Syrian conflict by the international print media. As media plays a very critical role in building the public opinion and an image regarding any event or crisis, its role needs to be analyzed and discussed. Syrian conflict is one of the biggest conflicts of the world and the role-played by the world powers is very critical vis-à-vis this conflict. The

objective of this paper is to study and review the frames applied by the international print media on Syrian Conflict and the type of coverage given to the Syrian conflict by the international print media. This review also attempts to identify the sources of news stories and editorial published on Syrian conflict.

To achieve the above objectives, this study examines the the framing, alterations in coverage of the Syrian conflict covered by the international print media in light of news stories and editorials. This study further attempts to identify the sources for the news pertaining to the Syrian conflict. The study has used framing method to analyze the content from the selected sample as ‘framing deals with the presentation of variety of topics such as politics, media, and conflict’ (Freyenberger, 2013). Framing theory is associated with news media (Thomas E. Nelson, 1997). ‘The effects are generally visible in journalism or media the “frame” surrounding an issue can change consumer’s perception without having to alter the actual facts as the same information is used as base’. Media with the help of few quotes, anecdotes or just an image can change the complete dynamics of the message (Finklea, 2013). “Framing as a theory is concerned with the presentation of the packages and presents the information in the public sphere. According to this theory, media highlights certain events and places them within a particular context to encourage or discourage certain interpretations” (Bateson, 1972). In his, book *Frame Analysis* Goffman (1974) asserts that people “locate, perceive, identify, and label” events and occurrences. This theory talks about how people think about an issue thrown by the media in the public domain (Goffman, 1974).

Framing is the perspective or an angle through which a news story is carried. Considering that news is supposed to be objective instead, it has become subjective in its production of packages. (Entman 1993) maintains that news is not an exact reality but the reconstruction of the authenticity from a range of undersized fragment of actuality. In another definition of framing Robert Entman asserts that frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or action advice for the item described (Entman, *Framing: Toward clarification of fractured paradigm.*, 1993).

Even though framing is mainly associated with the field of sociology and psychology, Communication scholar Robert Entman, asserts that concept of framing has vividly shaped the research in the field of media and conflict (Zhang, 2019). Few others such as Bennett WL, Lawrence RG, and Livingston S are of the view that news frames originate from dynamics of the top media and government (bureaucratic) partnerships (Bennett, 2007). Although few others such as (Reich, Z (2008) and Tuchman (1973) asserts that frames are mainly a result of news production procedures, media tactics and journalistic ethics.

Many of the studies conducted under the theoretical framework of framing, have helped researcher in understanding of the different forms of news frames. The impact of these frames is visible at entity level and collectively on community level as well (Iyenger, 1991). Researchers who have studied the news content produced on the various issues have classified frames into two main categories, based on theme and based on the episode, relying upon the methods of storytelling techniques applied in the news content.

Theme based frames contain narratives that primarily focus on information for e.g. (historical facts, official comments and stats). This information gives context or background to the story (Iyenger, 1991). In complete opposite are the episode-based frames, these frames give importance to single entity or happenings that serve to explain the events and occurrences. Episodic frames are considered psychologically more absorbing (Gross, 2008) because of their compelling nature and power to elicit emotions, this type of frame strengthens the influencing perceptions about any event or issue covered (Iyenger, 1991) (Zhang, 2019).

In their study about conflict reporting, (Nygren et al 2018) summed up on following points after analyzing the content of news coverage of Russian, Ukrainian, Sweden and Poland regarding the 2014 conflict that took place between pro- Russian forces, anti-government forces and Ukrainian government in eastern Europe. They discovered that except for Sweden both Russia and Poland had created frames that reflected the political and past background of each nation.

In summary, this review is performed with the attempt to answer the following questions:

- What frames did international print media applied to the Syrian conflict?
- How did the international print media cover Syrian conflict?
- What are different alterations presented to the world audiences by the international print Media?

2 Methodology

For the present study, the content analysis of news stories and editorials focusing on the Syrian conflict was conducted for the first ten days of the April 2017. Berelson, B, (1952) defined content analysis as “a research method for the systematic, objective and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”. Content analysis method is applicable in multiple fields but mostly this technique is tailor made for the field of social science for obtaining the best possible results. Hockings and Stacks (1992) view content analysis as “a research method or a measurement technique that involves the systematic study of the content of communication messages” (John E. Hockings, 2008). The study attempts to identify the different frames hidden in the content. The news articles and editorials were collected from the top seven international dailies from around the world. The Guardian, The New York Times, Washington post, Wall Street journal, Sydney Morning Herald, China Daily, and The Times of India for maintaining the stout coverage of foreign news especially related to conflict. In addition, they are most popular and widely circulated newspapers in the world.

2.1 Sampling

The study attempts to analyze and examine the news stories and editorials pertaining to the Syrian conflict appearing on the newspapers of seven most popular and prominent English dailies of the world. These news dailies include The Guardian,

The New York Times, Washington post, wall Street Journal, Sydney Morning Herald, China Daily, and the Times of India (Singh, 2010). Various websites which maintain the records of the circulations of each newspaper in the world such as, Audit Bureau of circulation, International Federation of the Journalists, World Atlas.com, Trendder and Topyaps revealed that above selected newspapers are the most circulated, famous and prominent English dailies of the world, (World Atlas, 2017). The reference period of the study is first ten days of the April 2017. The samples were collected through multiple means such as the archives, websites, and subscription mode as well. After the collection and compilation, a total of 69 news stories and 36 editorials from the selected sample were analyzed throughout the ten days reference period.

- a) The Guardian is top English daily in the world. This news daily has won most prestigious Pulitzer awards multiple times (Tsang, 2016).
- b) The New York Times: is the second most popular English news daily in the world. It is the only newspaper in the history to have won Pulitzer award 25 times (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007).
- c) The Wall Street Journal: based in the American city of New York, This news daily has won multiple awards including the prestigious Pulitzer award (Garrison, 2013).
- d) Washington post published in Washington. DC is the fourth most popular newspaper in the world (Sousa, 2009). It is multi Pulitzer award winning daily (Kurtz, 2008).
- e) China Daily is the leading English newspaper published and owned by the ruling communist party of China. It is the only newspaper in south Asia to have won 72 or more awards from 2003 to 2017. It is the fifth most popular news daily in the world (Bruce, 2004).
- f) The Times of India is the sixth most popular circulated, famous, and prominent newspaper in the world, its largest selling English news daily in India (Ntarajan, Arnold P, & Roger D.Long, 2011). It is a multi-award winning news daily in sports reporting, social impact award and more (Prasad, 2016).
- g) Sydney Morning Herald, (SMH) is the oldest and largest selling newspaper in the Australia and over all the seventh most prominent news daily in the world. Founded by Ward Stephens, Frederick stokes and William Mcgarvie (Tabak Off, 2011).

2.2 Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Table 1 and Table 2 show the number of stories and editorials that appeared on the conflict for the reference period of ten days.

Table 1: Newspaper Stories

S. No.	Name of Newspaper	Stories
1	The Guardian	9
2	The New York Times	14

3	Wall Street Journal	15
4	Washington Post	9
5	China Daily	8
6	The Times of India	3
7	The Sydney Morning Herald	11
8	TOTAL	69

Table 2: Newspaper Editorials

S. No.	Name of Newspaper	Editorials
1	The Guardian	7
2	The New York Times	10
3	Wall Street Journal	3
4	Washington Post	5
5	China Daily	4
6	The Times of India	2
7	The Sydney Morning Herald	5
8	TOTAL	36

3 Findings

To identify and reveal the main frames or dominant frames that were embedded in the news stories and editorials of the top seven selected dailies. A total 69 of news stories and 36 editorials were comprehensively examined and studied manually by the researchers.

3.1 Frames applied by the international print media to the Syrian conflict:

An analysis of the show that the frames applied by these top selected international newspapers of the to the Syrian conflict primarily focused on the following news frames. “Chemical attack”, “regime”, “Russia and Iran”, “civilian deaths”, “child deaths”, “criticism”, “war crimes”, “nerve gas”, “chlorine gas”, “intervention”, “responsibility” and “outrage” were the most highlighted frames by all of the selected samples based in the west.

3.1.1 Chemical attack:

One of the most highlighted frame along with regime. Russia, Iran, civilian deaths, child deaths and nerve gasses were the ones that western newspapers focused on. In addition to that, news stories totally focussed on bringing the Syrian chemical attack in front of the world. Quite apparent the blame was simply put on Assad and his forces to have carried out the attack on the civilians. The world leaders especially based in the west criticised Assad and his forces; moreover they tried to hold Russia accountable for this gruesome attack on April 4, 2017.

3.1.2 Responsibility Frame:

The three US based dailies primarily held Assad responsible for the chemical attack and called it as a worst chemical attack in years. Even though this attack killed 58 people as compared to 2013 that killed more than hundred people. US newspapers completely blasted Assad and his allies and held him responsible. Russia in one or two instances tried to put the blame on ISIS but US categorically rejected this narrative

3.1.3 Outrage Frame:

The newspapers based in the west tried to generate the sympathy from the entire world community in order to hold Assad and his allies responsible and advocated that some strong actions must be taken against the alleged Syrian armed forces. In doing so they did manage to gather a good support in favour of US as Australian Prime Minister Mark Turnbull statement suggests when he said, “I knew in advance that Trump administration was going to order airstrikes against the Assad forces” He further advocated that some more serious steps must be taken in order to protect Syrian civilians.

3.1.4 Civilian Deaths:

Besides these above frames newspapers based in the west provided stats of the people who died in the war, one such example is found in the NYT story published on April 8, which alleged that when some 500000 people died in the civil war why do hundreds killed in the chemical attack get so much attention (The New York Times, 2017/7/04).

3.1.5 War Crime:

Another frame that was manifested in the news stories and editorials was war crimes. All the newspapers of the west held Assad responsible for committing war crimes against the civilians by using weapons that were filled with chemical compounds such as, Sarin, chlorine, mustard and nerve gas. The western newspapers were packed with stories and editorials focussing on the compounds used in the chemical weapons.

3.1.6 Intervention Frame:

This frame was manifested in the editorials featured in the western based newspapers, most number of editorials were in favour of the American intervention in Syrian conflict. These stories and editorials advocated that Trump administration must attack and get actually get involved in the war and start pounding the Syrian airbases used for carrying airstrikes on civilians with chemical weapons. Thus, intervention frame was most highlighted in the editorials by the western based print media.

The selected newspapers of the west have framed this conflict positively, as most number of the stories were in favour of the Syrian people and their sufferings struggle in the civil war. The frames applied were thematic in nature and constructive in formation of the Syrian conflict, and episodic frames were also employed in the news

stories and editorials but they were mostly non-existent in comparison to the thematic ones.

However, the framing would be considered as positive keeping in view the focus of western selected samples highlighted throughout the reference period, but other issues were given less prominence such as refugee frames and displacement morality were either minimal or non-existent in the news stories but editorials did occupy this frame to some extent. All selected western based sample did not highlight the role of ISIS and rebels frames during the ten days.

The two newspapers based in East: China Daily and The Times of India have framed this issue marginally different than those samples based in the west; their approach can be considered as mixed. Frames highlighted by the China Daily are; “ISIS”, “Rebels”, “American intervention”, “denials”, “criticism”, and “American airstrikes.”

Frames that were prevalent in Times of India coverage are, US vs. Russia, face off, escalation, airstrikes. Their frames are episodic in nature with specificity on the frames of war, and airstrikes.

The framing of the western and eastern based samples are completely in contrast to each other, western based print media had their focus on the civilians and chemical attack and Assad, whereas the eastern based selected print sample had their focus on external factors with regard to Syrian crisis while other focus was on ISIS, rebels, intervention and defending government.

Out of the ten news stories published by the China Daily and The Times of India, two were in favour of the Syrian people, one was neutral and seven stories were against them. The framing done by these newspapers together is completely opposite to the frames that were applied by the western newspapers. These top two newspapers have not published stories as one would expect from them, after analyzing the stories and editorials the frames that appeared were episodic in nature and largely negative.

3.2 Coverage of the International print media cover the Syrian conflict

After going through the sample analysis, the study revealed that, the amount of coverage given to the Syrian conflict is marginally insufficient as far as first ten days of April 2017 is concerned, and it was found that Syrian conflict did not enjoy the fair coverage provided by the world print media. Considering those 69 stories and 36 editorials published by the world print media for selected ten days the ratio for each day stands at 6.9 and 3.6 editorials. The western newspapers somehow were not able to empathize with the common Syrians. The number of stories is far less on civilian issues.

3.3 The different alterations presented to the world audiences by the International Print Media:

The researchers found, the amount of the coverage suggests the portrayal was largely negative based on the range of the issues that world print media was covering, they were either limited to the chemical attack or their narrative was superficially limited

to the regime. Western based print media blamed regime for carrying out deadly attack and in return the regime and its allies accused the rebels supported by the west. In addition, ISIS that is the main perpetrator in the Syrian conflict, was not mentioned. The print media sample from the East did not mention civilians fairly, as the media is supposed to be the voice of suppressed people.

Till April 3, except for NYT and WSJ no other newspaper had carried any story, as if Syrian conflict did not even exist, but as chemical attacks took place on April 4, entire selected sample came bustling with news stories and editorials. Few researches in the past suggest that news has become commodity which means “news is only good when it reaches the maximum distribution”. As far alterations are concerned the western based print media’s prime intention looked as if Syria was all about the chemical attacks and Assad. Whereas the Eastern based selected newspapers had presented superficial view of Syrian conflict by reporting the particular specific event centred issues of the Syrian crisis, whereas other one reported about the American intervention and ISIS.

3.3.1 Less reported issues or neglected issues

The issues that deserved space but were ignored by the world print media, which were equally important to be reported as the main conflict was reported by the international print media. The motive may be that world print media largely focussed their attention chemical attacks, ISIS, Assad forces, Russia and USA which happens to be just one aspect of the Syrian civil war the other issues were that were equally important were left out by them. The implications of the Syrian conflict has given a great discomfort to the world regulatory bodies such UNHCR, UNDP, OPCW, UNICEF and Red Cross.

The refugee crises have already crossed 1.2 million people. Similarly, the water crisis, food, education, health sector of Syria is decimated by the conflict but world media did not made any effort to highlight the issues that were equally important if not more. Syria’s GDP, Power sector, servicing sector has gone into the deeper crisis, but world print media came up short when it came to highlight these issues.

Further research on the sources of news stories, editorials and photographs found that news stories published in the Guardian newspaper were reported by their special correspondents. Implying thereby that this was an important beat assigned to their correspondents. The correspondents who have reported on this issue have been assigned varied geographical zones like Lebanon Jordan etc. Table 3 highlights the sources of the leading newspapers selected for this study.

Table 3: Sources of the selected newspapers

Name	News sources	Editorials	Photographs
The Guardian	Alan Yuhas, Nadia Khomani Jamie Grierson, Cloure Philips, Spencer Ackerman, Ed Pilkington based in New York, Ben	Anushka Asthana,	

	Jacobs, and Julian bothers Washington DC.		
NYT	Helene cooper, Patrick Kingsley, Anne Bernard, Michael R. Gordon, Michael d shear, Ben Hubbard	Editorial Board	
WSJ	Rasmussen, Rory Jones, Michael C. Bender, Paul Stone, Caroleene, Gordon Jubold.	Walter Russell Mead	Omar Haj Kadour Omar Sanadiki, Yves Herman
WP	Liz sly, missy Ryan, Thomas gibbon, Richard Price, Max Boot, Mary Lynch Michael Birnbaun, Sudarshan	Colin H Kahl, Eugene Robinson, and Ej Dlone and Josh Rogin	
China Daily	Xinhua news Agency	Editorial Board	
SMH	David Wroe and Paul McGough, AP, AFP, and Reuters	Melanie Kembrey, Joshine Tovey, and Lynette Eyb	
TOI	Sudarshan, AFP, AP and Reuters	Editorial Board	

3.3.2 Type and treatment of news stories and editorials

By and large, Maximum stories are published with pictures on front pages by all means images do increase the value of the news item in terms of its interpretation of an issue. The purpose of the pictures was mainly to catch the eye of the reader and strengthen the aesthetic value of news item. Majority of the selected sample portrayed the Syrian conflict comprehensively with intention of highlighting the war crimes committed by the regime lead by Basher al- Assad. Western based media did well to bring critical issues in Syrian conflict during the studied period. However, the focus was towards bringing attention of world leaders especially the Nato Allies towards the chemical weapons and early American intervention.

3.3.3 Results of Content Analysis

The content analysis of the news stories and editorials were studied and examined comprehensively in order to reach a meaningful conclusion. The frames manifested in news stories and editorials are thematic in nature and constructive in formation of the Syrian crisis. The reason may be that western countries such US, UK were not directly involved in the conflict until 2017. The coverage and portrayal also changed post chemical attack. International media initially gave a very limited view of the Syrian conflict prior to chemical attacks. As suggested by Doucet (2018) from 2013 to 2017, Western media had a pattern of covering the Syrian conflict which kept on fluctuating. The coverage included reporting only selective events and leaving out other equally important issues in the conflict as same was done with regard to the Sudanese conflict as well (Doucet, 2018).

Thematic frames appear to be safe and complete while building an understanding of conflict to the world as these frames deal with over all construction and presentation of an issue rather than mere episodes. Media based in the east had episodic frames manifested in news stories and editorials. The eastern media reduced the Syrian conflict to just a mere issue in global politics. The most highlighted frame was the “chemical attack” which dominated the world print media.

Another important frame was “outrage” “civilian deaths” followed by the “responsibility frame” “war crime” “Russian intervention” and “American intervention” the western media accused and blamed Russia for protecting and assisting Assad regime in carrying out the gruesome crime against the civilians. China Daily blamed rebels for carrying out chemical attack their frames were episodic in nature and pseudo in formation similar, approach was adopted by the Times of India also; both these international dailies implied either negative frames or neutral at some places. Same thing was repeated in editorials as well. Even though they were outsiders in the conflict, but both these newspapers could have done little better when it comes to reporting the Syrian conflict their frames include “Airstrikes” “Rebels” “regime denial” these are exactly opposite to what others manifested in their news stories and editorial pieces.

International media becomes an important stake holder in any conflict and it’s their duty to become the voice of the voiceless and marginalized civilians because, “Syria’s internal media both mainstream and alternate media have failed to provide objective and complete picture of the Syrian conflict, despite being the insider in this conflict” (Badran, 2018). This is why current study is important in understanding how media outside of Syria managed to capture and present the crisis to the world audiences.

The most notable contribution of this study is that despite so many hardships put in place by regime the correspondents and reporters risked their life while covering Syrian conflict. International print media did manage to cover the Syrian conflicts most violent phases “thematically”. The majority of studied sample tried to bring world attention on Syrian conflict, but it was not a complete and comprehensive picture of what Syrian people were going through under totalitarian regime of President Bashar Al-Assad.

4. Conclusion

Even though majority of print media framed Syrian crisis positively, but portrayal was pseudo positive, out of 69 stories 85% are indirectly in favour of Syrian people while, editorials didn’t mention Syrian people. Portrayal is mixed or pseudo which means it was not complete as the focus of the world print media was on chemical attack itself. However, western media did manage to convince “Trump” to intervene in the conflict. Coverage was based on the instant events such as chemical attacks and US and Russia, which happens to be a small part of this humongous problem known as Syrian conflict. A lot of issues remained untouched such as, education crisis, gender-based violence, refugee crisis, sectarian rift, and surprisingly a central tenet of the Syrian conflict ISIS was nowhere mentioned in international print media. Presumptuously or not, world print media helped the Syrian people in making their suppressed voices heard on the international platforms such as UN and UNSC. To sum up, international print media could have brought a better understanding to the

world audiences regarding the Syrian conflict. There are much more complex problems hidden in the Syrian conflict which need to be addressed properly and media can not only help in building more comprehensive understanding in any conflict, but it can also suggest a way for the peaceful solution of the complex issues. However, it seems out of proportions when it comes to Syrian conflict. A peaceful political solution to the problem where stakes are so high for the world powers seems unlikely. Further studies need to be conducted, so to expand the understanding of Syrian conflict with the help of different media platforms.

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