



Pandemic versus Infodemic: A Comparison of English and Urdu Newspapers in Pakistan

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Abstract:

On the 23rd of March 2020, Daily *Nawa-i-Waqat* (one of Pakistan's leading Urdu newspapers) published the picture of a lion released in Russia to enforce the lockdown because of the COVID-19 outbreak. A day after the publication of the picture—which became a front-page story—however, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* published a corrigendum about the false news. The bombardment of media messages in the wake of the pandemic led the World Health Organization to rightly declare the situation an 'infodemic,' wherein the spread of misinformation and rumors not only increased the atmosphere of uncertainty but also gave rise to an uncanny milieu of anxiety. In Pakistan, the Urdu Press manifested a failure to maintain the responsibility of fact-checking. By contrast, English newspapers in the country appeared to maintain the standards of accuracy in the provision of news related to the pandemic. This suggests that the English Press in Pakistan—albeit having low circulation because of the language barrier—is more meticulous and professional.

The situation of the coronavirus pandemic helps us identify the different functioning of two types of newspapers in the country that are not only linguistically different, but also vary in terms of practicing journalistic standards that raise and uplift the taste and morale of people. By employing the methodology of rhetorical criticism, I analyze an Urdu (*Nawa-i-Waqat*) and an English (*Daily Dawn*) newspaper in Pakistan for the presentation of information related to the pandemic. Following Shoemaker's media gatekeeping theory, I argue that studying the COVID-19 news in two different strands of newspapers is a perfect case in point to exhibit the chasm of English versus Urdu Press in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Infodemic, Misinformation, Coronavirus, Pakistan*



Introduction:

This essay discusses the example of the novel Coronavirus coverage by Pakistani newspapers to present the stark contrast between Urdu and English press in the country. The difference in the functioning of the two has come to the spotlight in the aftermath of the novel Coronavirus outbreak in Pakistan. While the majority of English newspapers in the country, particularly *Dawn*—the country’s most circulated English newspaper—reflected a professional and responsible propensity toward fact-checking, the country’s second largest—in terms of circulation—Urdu newspaper, *Nawa-i-Waqat*, sometimes appeared to be incautious, sensational, or unprofessional. The essay further argues that the two newspapers cater to two different classes in the country, whereby those equipped with the resources of English acquisition have the consumption of English newspapers (also known as the elite press). Whereas the majority, having no or limited means to internalize the English language, generally consume the Urdu press, which appears to overstate COVID-19. This situation has (or may have) repercussions for the news media’s role in uplifting public tastes and facilitating debates. The analysis of reporting related to the Coronavirus pandemic in a Pakistani Urdu newspaper not only demonstrates the spread of spurious information (a situation rightly declared an ‘infodemic’ by the World Health Organization (WHO)) but also presents a perfect case in point for the Urdu and English press juxtaposition. Here, I essentially discuss the impulsive reporting of Pakistan’s Urdu newspaper, *Nawa-i-Waqat*, and compare it with an English newspaper, *Dawn*, to argue that the Urdu newspapers in the country are significantly different from their English counterparts and need to be on the same page for lessening the classism and overall well-being of general masses.

This study has two main research objectives. First, there is a sharp contrast in the presentation style of English and Urdu press in Pakistan; the investigation of COVID-19 media coverage by the two linguistically different newspapers is a perfect case in point. Second, the delineation of the COVID-19 pandemic was so sensational in one of country’s leading Urdu newspapers that it corroborates the WHO’s description of the situation, i.e., pandemic being an infodemic. Thus, in the light of these study objectives, this paper has two research questions:



RQ 1: What are the differences, if any, between Pakistan's English and Urdu press in terms of news presentation?

RQ 2: Does the WHO's suggestion of infodemic correspond to either strand (English or Urdu) of press in Pakistan? If so, how?

In what follows, I present a review of existing literature on topic, which is then followed by a detailed description on methodology. Then I present discussion of findings based on rhetorical analysis.

Literature Review:

Before I explicate the reckless reporting of the *Nawa-i-Waqat*, it is essential to consider the situation of print journalism in Pakistan. In a country report about digital media in Pakistan, Huma Yusuf described that in 2011, almost 80 percent of the country's print media was published in Urdu. In contrast, the English print media came in a second distant at 8 percent (2013, 19). As English is the country's official language and a lingua franca of Pakistan's elite, its learning and acquisition are confined to a small, privileged class (Rahman, 2005). The International Media Support wrote in its report on Pakistani media that "English print, television, and radio channels have far smaller audiences than their Urdu counterparts, but have great leverage among opinion makers, politicians, the business community, and the upper strata of society" (2019, p.14). This reveals a significant difference in the functioning, performance, and audience of English and Urdu Press in Pakistan.

It is important to recall that Pakistan is a multilingual country. Pakistan's eminent linguist, Tariq Rahman (2002), has identified more than 50 languages and dialects in Pakistan. Rahman has further argued that the country has eight widely spoken languages (4556). Similarly, according to a source named "CIA: The World Facebook," there is 48% Punjabi speaking population, 12% Sindhi, 8% Pushto, 8% Urdu, 3% Balochi, 2% Hindko, and 1% Barohi speaking population in the country. The report further reveals that English is the country's elite's lingua franca. Urdu also enjoys the status of being a lingua franca among the general populace regardless of ethnic, cultural, religious, and creed affiliations. In this backdrop, however, English enjoys the status of being a queen language. This is the country's official language and the language of Pakistan's ruling elite. However, Pakistan has problems with equal English acquisition. Rahman (1996) has claimed that



in Pakistan, the elite of wealth or the elite of power can have access to the learning of the English language (232). This suggests that the process of ‘Anglicization’ is unequal and used to appropriate privileges and resources.

In this multilingual landscape, Urdu is the most published language in newspaper publications. According to a report by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2011), Urdu is the most published language in newspapers. This was succeeded by English; then came Sindhi and Pushto publications (quoted in Yusuf (2013)). This explains that Urdu is Pakistan's most read and widely circulated print media. This also suggests that English media is second after Urdu but a distant second. According to a report by Open Society Foundations, Urdu dailies are conservative and publish opinionated articles (Yusuf, 22). The findings of this research further substantiate this argument.

An overall review of existing literature suggests that there is not adequate research on the comparison of Urdu and English journalism in Pakistan. Several research studies focus on the overall comparison of English and Urdu—as languages, their learning opportunities, conflicting prospects, and especially ramifications of unequal learning opportunities for language in Pakistan. However, there appears to be a dearth of studies on comparing linguistically divided journalism in Pakistan. For the analysis of the two press systems, Sadaf (2011) wrote that in the Judicial crisis (2009), both Urdu and English newspapers played a significant role; however, Urdu newspapers were more emphatic than English newspapers (267). Sadaf (2011)’s study entails the analysis of an incident that led to the reinstatement of Pakistan’s Chief Justice. For this event, Pakistani media (irrespective of the language) in general, played a vibrant role. For this reason, examples from the analysis of other situations are also needed to ascertain the differences in Pakistani press in the two languages.

Similarly, Rahman and Eijaz (2014) have studied the difference between English and Urdu dailies in the context of the Lal Masjid event in the heart of the country’s capital—Islamabad. The event of Lal Masjid was a clash between Islamic fundamentalists and the government of Pakistan in 2007. This study is critical because the researchers argued that English newspapers mainly reflected the views of Pakistan’s elite, whereas Urdu newspapers generally reflected the religious sentiments of Pakistan’s majority population. Moreover, the researchers also mentioned language divisions in Pakistan (298). Although this is a significant study, it mainly focused on opinion articles—columns and editorials—and examined the Lal Masjid incident in the context of peace and war journalism. Overall,



Rahman and Eijaz (2014)'s research is devoid of a focus on news items. In this context, the present study contributes to the existing literature by exploring areas that have not been explored at length in previous research studies.

Methodology:

As this study deals with the textual analysis of news stories in Pakistani mainstream English and Urdu press, a rhetorical criticism approach, in this case, is viable. Through this approach, I have examined the rhetoric used by newspapers in the two languages. The names of two newspapers that I have used for textual analysis include *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqat*. The choice of newspapers here is based on the reason of my long-term exposure to both newspapers. It is correct that the *Nawa-i-Waqat* has a reputation of being a right-wing newspaper in comparison to its another Urdu counterpart named *Jang*. However, the judgment of Open Society Foundations is worth considering in this regard. It bears repeating that the report claimed that Urdu dailies are "highly opinionated" (Yusuf, 22). In this context, it is essential to note that though *Jang* (an Urdu newspaper) appears to have a liberal approach in comparison to *Nawa-i-Waqat* (both *Jang* and *Nawa-i-Waqat* are the country's two leading Urdu newspapers), it is also true that English press is more assiduous and professional. Furthermore, the English press is also known to be bolder and more open, especially in terms of performing the role of watchdog (surveillance) and challenging the status quo. Thus, in this sense, the choice of a particular Urdu or English newspaper does not matter. The purpose of analysis here is to present an overall comparison of Urdu and English press that sometimes appears to be quite different.

As for the time period, this research entails newspaper reports that were published from March 16, 2020, to March 2021. This is almost twelve months. March 2020 was the month when the situation of COVID-19 started to become intense, especially in the chief cities of the country. For this reason, March 2020 is a reasonable date to be considered as a beginning point for the study. Although the pandemic existed for several months, the overall situation remained intense (and a pressing issue in media debates) for almost a year. Thus, the selection of twelve months, i.e., March 2020 to March 2021, is quite apt for this study. The analysis of news reports within this period provides essential data to ascertain that the circumstances ensuing the pandemic gave rise to an infodemic wherein several rumors and incorrect information became widespread. The analysis will also explicate



that an obvious contrast can be observed in the function of English and Urdu press in Pakistan.

As for the analysis of news reports, this paper has focused only on news items. In other words, the textual analysis of COVID-19 related stories is limited to news only. This does not include opinion articles where newspaper organizations and op-ed writers give their opinion. Furthermore, since the news stories published on the front and back pages of the newspaper broadsheets carry more importance, I have considered stories only from the front and back pages of newspapers, i.e., *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqat*. Another reason for the choice of front and back pages is related to the fact that as COVID-19 was the most crucial issue during the selected period, both newspapers would publish pandemic-related news stories on their front and back pages. Thus, both pages, in this case, are viable sites of examination for the English-Urdu press comparison and the pandemic-infodemic argument.

To engage in textual analysis of news stories, I have employed the technique of rhetorical criticism. After a thorough review of news stories published in *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqat*, I have focused only on the news items that could be used as artifacts for analysis. Foss (2018) has argued that the selection of an artifact for the purpose of rhetorical criticism is an important step. Thus, I have treated the selected news items as artifacts in this study. Foss (2018) further claimed that a rhetorical criticism method leads to expanding rhetorical theory. This study, thus, argues how we can expect the audience populace in a given country to hold the same worldview of their surroundings if they are exposed to different viewpoints through media.

Discussion and Analysis:

Let us now discuss how the *Nawa-i-Waqat* reported in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. As numbers, statistics, reports, estimates, and predictions became ubiquitous in media, Pakistani newspapers, too, began advising the people of a possible outbreak in the country. Soon after the Pakistani government announced the first two cases of COVID-19 in Pakistan on February 27, 2020, the *Dawn* newspaper reported the news by referring to a tweet from the Special Assistant to Prime Minister on health, Dr. Zafar Mirza. In this news story, *Dawn* further reported that Dr. Mirza had asked the people to stay calm and not panic (Ali, 2020). By contrast, the *Nawa-i-Waqat*, while reporting the news, also provided the petty details of affected persons such as name, age, profession, and address (Khan, 2020).



Here, it is quite intriguing that the *Nawa-i-Waqat* alludes to Dr. Mirza's advice to media persons regarding not mentioning the affected persons' particulars in media. However, the *Nawa-i-Waqat*'s reporting here is contrary to the government's advice of not revealing infected persons' identities.

The overall coverage of COVID-19 in the *Nawa-i-Waqat* reveals that sometimes the newspaper seems to whip up fear of Coronavirus in public by providing sensational news. On March 23rd, 2020, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* published a picture of a lion in the street in Moscow. This picture, which appeared on the front page of the newspaper, was published with a caption that translates as:

Moscow: The lion set free on roads to avoid the spread of Coronavirus and confine citizens to their homes can be seen on the road. The government has released 500 lions to take strict measures (*Nawa-i-Waqat*, March 23, Print Copy).

The publication of this picture stirred up not only fear but also debates, gossip, and speculation. Given the country's social structure wherein sometimes extended families live together, and communal festivities are observed on religious and cultural occasions, it was a prevalent feeling that the ideas of 'isolation' and 'quarantine' are practically difficult for people in Pakistan. Thus, the publication of the lion's image by the *Nawa-i-Waqat* gave rise to discussions for adopting similar measures to enforce social distancing in Pakistan.

A day after the publication of the lion's picture, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* published a corrigendum to explain that the story of roaming lions in Russian streets was false. This correction was published on the third page of the newspaper and was much smaller in size and thus less noticeable. The newspaper explained in the continuing part of the correction that "social media spread false news about lions in Russia." With that, however, the newspaper did not mention its decision to publish an erroneous story on the front page, nor did the newspaper apologize for publishing a picture seemingly related to the Russian government's policy to curb the virus without fact-checking. The *Nawa-i-Waqat* does not seem to take responsibility for publishing fake news on the front page.

Here, it must be noted that the online copy of the same newspaper does not have the lion's picture and information. One can assume that maybe after the confirmation that the news was incorrect, the newspaper omitted the information from its digital copy that stays in the online archives. The published copies, however, were spread on a large scale with



many implications that I have already discussed. It is essential to be cognizant of the fact that not many consumers of the Urdu press in Pakistan are internet literate. In other words, although the newspaper digitizes its copies online, it is mainly read in physical copies because of many factors. The problems of power outages limited or no internet access, and lack of interest or knowledge for online newspaper consumption are just a few.

In another news story, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* published a report by the Office for National Statistics in the UK to relay that people from the subcontinent have an increased risk of death due to COVID-19 (Chaudhary, 2020). The information in this four-sentence-long news story gives the impression that people from the subcontinent are at risk rather than those of this origin living in the UK. On the other hand, the presentation of the same news story in *Dawn* provides the context and adequate details to clarify that Pakistani and Bangladeshi people living in western countries have an increased death rate compared to White people (Reuters, 2020). *Dawn*'s story also reports that British officials have urged an investigation into the matter. Here, the *Nawa-i-Waqat*'s fragmentary reporting and inept handling seem to elevate the fear of coronavirus in Pakistani readers.

In some news stories, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* appears to incite 'othering' in its reporting of coronavirus. While reporting the Pakistani Prime Minister's decision to ease the lockdown because of economic ramifications, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* brings up Pakistan's rivalry with India in its headline. In his press briefing, the Prime Minister referred to the situation in India, where an early lockdown began to cause economic problems. Now let us consider the difference in headlines between the two newspapers in the reporting of the same event: *Nawa-i-Waqat*'s headline translates as, "Moodi is a coward and has shut down the whole country" (Special Correspondent, 2020); in contrast, *Dawn*'s headline states that, "Lockdown to be further eased, says PM" (Raza, 2020). Although the subhead of the news story in the *Nawa-i-Waqat* talks about the government's measures to mitigate the lockdown restrictions, the main headline appeals to the 'us versus them' situation that presents an implicit comparison of India and Pakistan, where the former is presented to be too timid to continue the commercial activities. At the same time, the latter is courageous to resume them.

Similarly, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* reports the erroneous news of the self-quarantine of the US Vice President, Mike Pence, sensationally. Soon after Pence's aide (Katie Miller) tested positive, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* reported with the headline, "Corona made [Pence] run" (Netnews, 2020). This



presentation appeals to the anti-American sentiments of Pakistani people. To describe the same news, *Dawn* reported the positive tests of a couple of White House officials, citing credible sources (Correspondent, 2020). Unlike the *Nawa-i-Waqat*, *Dawn* did not report or comment on the self-quarantine of the US Vice President—a report that was contradicted by US news sources. The examples of *Dawn* discussed here are in consonant with the report of the International Media Support that in Pakistan English press is considered “urban, elite-centric, and more professional” (2009, p.6).

Although English newspapers have a low readership—they are “influential among Pakistan’s political, military and business elite” (Yusuf & Schoemaker, 2013, p. 14). Similarly, in her talk on “Who Watches the Watchdog?” Huma Yusuf (2013) has said that considering the low readership of the English press in Pakistan, English newspapers have remained mainly insulated from government censorship and restrictions. Another eminent journalist, Arifa Noor (2020), also validates this fact in her article. This means that the government policies have largely (and negatively) affected the Urdu press’s professional development for the publication conventions. Given this situation, one can assume that perpetual deterring circumstances and pressing requirements of increased readership may have led the Urdu newspapers to a clumsy approach that is sometimes reflected in their reporting—the coverage of COVID-19 in the *Nawa-i-Waqat* also manifests this. However, this is an unexamined assumption and needs a detailed empirical analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

An overall review of all news stories of *Nawa-i-Waqat* from the selected period reveals a general inclination of the newspaper towards anti-Indian rhetoric—even for non-pandemic news. For example, while reporting on the worsening situation of COVID-19 in India on April 20th of 2021, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* wrote that “People coming from India are banned; India is now included in Britain’s ‘Red List.’” Moreover, the same newspaper reports on Indian propaganda through WhatsApp. From a comparative lens, one can say that the Urdu newspaper is ideologically burdened. On the other hand, *Dawn* does not appear to do the same. This presentation, too, alludes to the idea that the country’s ideological motives drive Urdu newspapers. This situation corresponds to the idea of Urdu dailies being highly opinionated.

Conclusion:

The comparison between *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqat* is, admittedly, no perfect comparison. *Dawn* is Pakistan’s most circulated English national



publication, famous for having a liberal policy and seemingly practicing professional standards of journalism. *Nawa-i-Waqat* is Pakistan's conservative newspaper (International Media Support, 2009, p. 15) and is known for having a right-wing approach (Yusuf, 2013, p. 22). Although the existing chasm between the two strands of newspapers in the country cannot be fully discerned by the investigation of two newspapers only, what can be concluded is that the Urdu and English press in Pakistan is not on the same page. In other words, Urdu and English press in Pakistan is not producing similar world views for the audience. As the process of media gatekeeping, through the selection of news, determines the social reality for the audience, one can observe that both newspapers appear to create two different realities and, thus, two different social views.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) have argued that one of the most important functions of media gatekeeping is 'cognitive,' where the processes employed by media persons tend to shape people's thinking patterns and their beliefs. Additionally, according to Walter Lippmann (1922), newsmakers' selection of news and pictures is a crucial phenomenon that determines policymakers' decisions and people's responses to the news (as cited in Curtis, 1991). The case reviewed here has relevance beyond the fact-checking issue in reporting COVID-19. Here, I am not arguing that the dissimilarity of publishing conventions in newspapers is exclusively a byproduct of diverging government policies. My assertion here is that the harsh policies of governments for the Urdu press in Pakistan may have impinged upon the democratic development of Urdu media. Consequently, Urdu newspapers' publication norms, styles, and practices bear the impression of undemocratic policies. Considering the *Nawa-i-Waqat*'s publication of sensational news in the light of Lippmann's argument, Urdu media in Pakistan can neither play the agenda-setting role wherein media engages people in constructive public debate nor can media perform a watchdog role whereby media can influence policymakers to take timely corrective and preventive measures to control the spread of Coronavirus.

Although the analysis in this study emphasized the argument that one of the outlets from the mainstream media in Pakistan corroborated the idea of 'infodemic' proposed by the World Health Organization, it also explicated that mainstream media is linguistically quite different in the country. The presentation of news on COVID-19 was one of many such examples. In other words, in the analysis of pandemic-related news, we can see the differences in the coverage by the two media outlets. However, the same difference can also be found in the coverage of other areas as well.



Especially what are the areas in which English media appears bold, vocal, and open? This question will further demonstrate the inconsistencies between Urdu and English media. This, however, is not a scope of this study and, thus, can be one of the future research projects.

The *Nawa-i-Waqat* is a popular newspaper within the conservative-leaning environment in Pakistan. Being one of the few newspapers that started publication before the subcontinent's partition, the *Nawa-i-Waqat* played a vital role in Pakistan's independence movement. Overall, the newspaper has substantially impacted Pakistani readers, especially in promoting cultural, religious, and national values. The newspaper generally enjoys the reputation of a reliable newspaper. I, too, say this from personal experience where I grew up seeing/reading the *Nawa-i-Waqat* now in three generations of my family. Finally, the analysis of the infodemic (as the WHO would argue) in the *Nawa-i-Waqat* illuminates an area of potential improvement in the country's mainstream newspapers.

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