



Framing the Crisis: An Analysis of Turkish News Coverage of COVID-19

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Keywords

COVID-19, framing, crisis, online news.

Abstract

The global spread of COVID-19 has also got a wide media coverage due to its high rate of mortality and infections. Mass media serve a key role in providing information and making the general population aware of the situation during crises and the coverage of crises have attracted much attention in the field of media and communication studies. This study, employing the framing theory as the theoretical framework, compared the Turkish online media's coverage of COVID-19 over two time spans from February 26 to March 10, 2020 and from March 11 to March 26, 2020. The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Turkey on March 11, 2020 and this study focused on how online media framed the epidemic and to what extent framing of COVID-19 differed over two time spans. Findings revealed that two time spans demonstrated considerable differences in crisis coverage. Considering frames across time, most often used ones were reassurance and economic consequences. They were followed by health severity and action frames. Human interest and leadership were used least often in crisis coverage. The independent samples t test conducted to examine the differences across time demonstrated that periods are effective variables on the online coverage of the outbreak.

Article History

Received

15 Apr, 2020

Accepted

5 Jun, 2020

1. Introduction

The global spread of the novel coronavirus also known as COVID-19 has created international alarm and became a focus of media coverage due to its rapid spread and its high rate of infections and mortality. Countries globally have taken new measures including implementing quarantine, travel restrictions, closing schools, cancellations of cultural and religious events and closing their borders to stop the further spread of COVID-19. The press widely reported that the new coronavirus emerged from a wet market in Wuhan, China and the first cases occurred in China in December 2019 and has been reported in more than 150 countries. Declared a pandemic by The World Health Organization, it has killed thousands of people and sickened hundreds of thousands around the world.

Mass media serve a key role in providing information and making the general population aware of the situation during crises including environmental disasters, the spread of infectious diseases or terrorist attacks and coverage of crises have

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attracted much attention in the field of media and communication studies. Considering the social influence of media on society, those studies have mainly focused on media's positioning of the crises and its effect on people's perception of the crises rather than their direct impact. The main objective of this study is to examine to what extent Turkish online media coverage of COVID-19 differed over the two time spans from February 26 to March 10 2020 and March 11 to March 26 through employing the framing theory as the theoretical framework.

Any of a broad variety of situations in which unexpected and fast-developing events such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, accidents, economic, social and political problems threatening social order are referred as times of crisis in journalism. As crisis reporting covers reporting of disasters and risks, it is situated within a broader structural context. Disaster reporting mostly covers natural events. However, risk reporting usually associated with the concepts of probability and uncertainty involves any event that is likely to happen. The need to obtain information arises under extraordinary conditions as people feel overwhelming anxiety or panic. This makes people more dependent on media so journalism practices are attached more importance during crises. Crises may help the spread of disinformation and misinformation in a digital world in which people can easily access news and participate in the news production process and they are likely to believe any news they read online to get rid of the uncertainty. On the other hand, considering journalism practices, times of crisis offer opportunities to produce news content arousing audience's curiosity and agitating people through creating violence-packed stories (Çaplı & Taş, 2009, p. 237). According to Sandman, (1994, p. 251-260) discussing how to effectively communicate risks to the public, the amount of coverage relied on journalistic criteria which includes timeliness and human interest instead of danger of the risk in health terms and distressing content about risk is used more often than intermediate content restoring confidence.

Framing theory, which have roots in the disciplines of cognitive psychology and anthropology, refers to how information is organized and presented by media to the public as a theory of mass communication. The theory suggests that media highlights certain events and diverts the attention of audience. According to Goffman (1974, p. 21) as the one who first used the term in sociology, frames are "schemata of interpretation" the way people organize and understand life experience to interpret the vast amount of information through providing shortcuts. Tuchman (1978, p. 12), one of the framing pioneers in mass communication described the act of making news as "constructing reality rather than a picture of reality". Focusing on a specific piece of reality, framing offers prespecified directions for audience to interpret reality. According to Gitlin (2003, p. 7) frames are usually unspoken and unacknowledged. They help journalists who report the world to organize it as they do for individuals since we rely on their reports. They are "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." Similarly, Entman (1993, p. 52-53) in his much cited definition, defines the concept as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition,

causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

Much research conducted within the theoretical framework of framing focuses on the process of frame- frame-setting. Frame-building is concerned with the variables affecting structural aspects of news frames. These studies focus on framing process carried out by journalists and news organization as well as considering interaction between journalists and elites. Frame-setting process, on the other hand, refers to the interaction which occurs between audience and media frames as frames are considered to impact how the issues are interpreted and evaluated (Vreese, 2005, p.52) Framing research is also classified with respect to analysing frames as independent or dependent variables. While studies employing frames as dependent variables focus on the components affecting the framing process including journalistic criteria or organizational pressures. At the media level, individual or ideological variables are taken into consideration. Research using frames as independent variables is more related to the effects of frames on audience (Scheufele, 1999, p.107). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also classified framing analysis into two main types of analysis; the inductive and deductive approach. The former approach requires analysing news content to identify all the possible frames. The latter one starts analysing with predefining certain frames and investigates the occurrence of those in the news.

The theory of framing has been employed often to conduct research on news coverage and the ones carried out in times of crises mostly addressed pandemics of the last few decades. Applying both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, the studies used inductive and deductive approaches for the identification of frames in the news. Pioneering studies in framing outbreaks are mostly related to SARS, which was first appeared in China in 2002 and spread to more than two dozen countries. According to a study, trying to analyse how SARS was framed in Chinese and American newspapers showed the use of frames in different degree and manner varied based on the newspaper's country of origin (Luther & Zhou, 2005). A similar study of framing of SARS outbreak analysed reports from BBC and CNN websites. The results revealed that while SARS crisis was framed in different ways in both websites, they share several common similarities. Both online platforms focused the effects of outbreak on the medical system and public health, and the issue was framed from a global perspective. However, economic dimension of the crisis was more noticeable in the CNN news (Tian & Stewart, 2005). The study comparing SARS news stories from Chinese newspaper and web portal, and a regional newspaper showed that while health severity frame was used more often in the national newspaper than the regional one, economic frame and international sources were employed more often in the web portal than either newspaper (Hong, 2007). Some scholars have also examined how media covered swine flu which has caused a global panic in recent years. Liu (2012) studied how television news content in China and the U.S. framed H1N1 influenza and the results revealed the differences in the use of frames and sources. The study also showed that average visibility of all five frames in the U.S. media indicating the news coverage of the outbreak was more diverse and comprehensive. Previous literature on framing pandemics has also addressed

Ebola outbreak which took place in West Africa between 2014 and 2016 and caused major loss of life. For example the study discussing news coverage of Ebola in Nigerian newspapers revealed more than one-third of the news stories are on treatment and control/containment frame and it indicated the social responsibility interest of the newspapers to have a control oriented impact on the public behaviour rather than “competing newspapers interests to sell”. (Adelakun & Adnan, 2016). According to a similar study investigating framing of Ebola and SARS by a leading Chinese news agency, frames of reassurance, responses by domestic government(s), the economic effects, and confidence in government were used more often for SARS than Ebola. However, the same news agency employed less health effects and responses by international government(s) frames for SARS than Ebola. The qualitative part of the research indicated that the Chinese news agency framed the diseases in ways promoting a positive image of the Chinese government which may be considered as a reflection of governmental influence on Chinese media (Jin, Brewer & Ley, 2017). We also identified two studies on framing crisis through a review of the literature in Turkey. The first one addressing representation of Crimean Crisis in 2014, in four major newspapers employing different political ideologies revealed all newspapers used similar frames although having different news sources (Seyidov, 2018). The second study focused on how Turkish newspapers covered Iran nuclear crisis and analysed frontpage news and the following subtitles on eight daily newspapers. The research confirmed that liberal newspapers emphasizes dangers and threats posed by Iran’s nuclear activities while in conservative newspapers, Iran was portrayed as a country to be followed closely considering its political, economic and moral aspects (Kılıç, 2007).

2. Methodology

Declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and has spread rapidly to more than 150 countries. It has infected more than 200000 people and killed more than 8,000 globally. This study first aims to reveal frames that underlay Turkish online news coverage on COVID-19 outbreak. The second aim of this research is to analyse how frames adopted by the news website differ across time. Thus we proposed our two research questions as follows:

RQ1: How did ensonhaber.com frame the crisis of COVID-19?

RQ2: To what extent did the framing of COVID-19 differ over two time spans before and after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Turkey?

Based on research questions and conceptual framework, the research hypothesis was proposed as follows:

Null Hypotheses (H_0): There is no significant difference across in terms of how the frames are used.

Alternative Hypotheses (H_1): There is a significant difference across time in terms of how the frames are used.

This study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine dominant frames used to portray the outbreak and how those frames changed over two time spans.

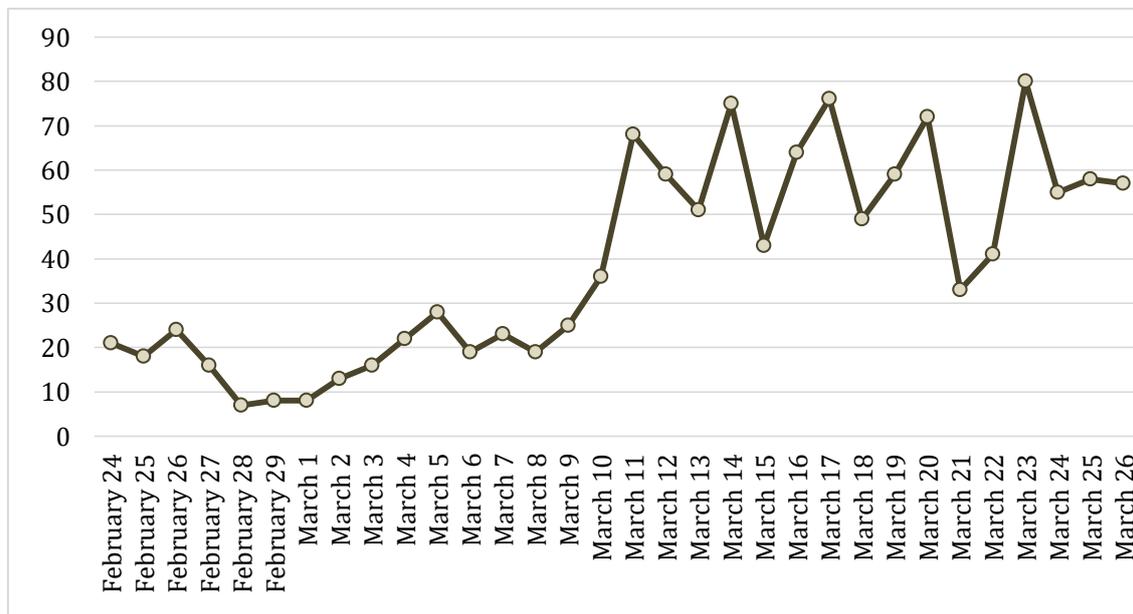
2.1. Sampling

This study undertakes a comparative framing analysis of media coverage of COVID-19 outbreak, as reported by *ensonhaber.com*, which is the most popular online platform for accessing news in Turkey to the latest Alexa top websites list (Alexa, 2020). Founded in 2005, *Ensonhaber.com* is a market-driven news website offering daily updated news articles under domestic news, foreign news, politics, economy and technology. March 11 is the date when the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Turkey so we divided our sample in two periods, February 26-March 10 and March 11-24, and compared news coverage of COVID-19.

2.2. Data collection

We collected news articles about COVID-19 carried by the *ensonhaber.com* between February 24, 2020, and March 26, 2020 when the outbreak was most severe and reached its peak in some countries thus people were getting much concerned with crisis. We used the search engine on the news website to get the articles on COVID-19. By using key terms such as “Coronavirus”, “Koronavirus”, “Covid 19” and “Kovid 19” in the initial search, a total of 1418 news articles were retrieved. After excluding news items which did not specifically refer to COVID-19, the final sample included 1242 online news articles (February 24-March 10, N=299; March 11-26, N=943).

Figure 1. Daily number of news on the coverage of “COVID-19”



2.3. Research Process

Although the method of the study is predominantly deductive, we also use inductive approach in which we added new frames appeared as analysing the content to pre-defined set of frames based on previous studies (Hong, 2007; Hove, Paek, Yun & Jwa, 2015; Beaudoin, 2007). The set of frames used for the analysis are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of frames used in the analysis

Frame	Description
Health Severity	It refers to the effects of a health risk on human life and involves incidence and mortality rates.
Human Interest	This frame refers to emotional problems people suffer from the outbreak, their condition and the impact of the disease on their everyday life.
Economic Consequences	It is about the economic impact of the outbreak on people, institutions or countries.
Action	It includes measures which ordinary people or those in charge take avoid or prevent contagion.
Reassurance	This frame includes expressions which may make people feel safe and those in charge are able to deal with contagion
Leadership Frame	This frame refers to political actors' activities and reactions related to the disease outbreak.

Coding was carried out by the author and another researcher who trained on how to code the data. Intercoder reliability is used as critical criterion in order to evaluate the validity of the study as it indicates the level of agreement among two or more independent coders using the same coding scheme (Allen, 2017). The coder assigned frames and identified topics for 10% of the randomly selected texts data (124 news items on COVID-19 outbreak). We tested the reliability of data through employing Cohen's kappa interrater reliability and inter-rater agreement on coding and we found an almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012), with a Cohen's Kappa of 0.82. A further analysis was also conducted to examine whether there were significant differences across time considering news frames and we used independent samples t-test to compared the mean score of each frame.

3. Results

Our sample consisted of 1242 online news articles; 299 from the first and 943 from the second period of the research. To answer the first research question, means and standart deviations on variables are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of news frames

Variables	M	SD	N
Health Severity	0,38	0,48	1242
Human Interest	0,29	0,45	1242
Economic Consequences	0,46	0,50	1242
Action	0,32	0,46	1242
Reassurance	0,62	0,49	1242
Leadership	0,30	0,46	1242

Considering frames over two time spans, most often used frames were reassurance and economic consequences (M=0.62, SD=0.49 and (M=0.46, SD=0.50, respectively). They were followed by health severity (M=0.38, SD=0.48) and action frames (M=0.32, SD=0.46). Human interest (M=0.29, SD=0.45) and leadership (M=0.30, SD=0.46) were used least often among COVID-19 stories.

A further analysis was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between the frames in each period. The second research question, "To what extent did the framing of COVID-19 differ between two periods-before and

after the first case was reported-in Turkey?" was addressed using independent t tests.

Table 3. Independent t-tests for use of six frames across periods

<i>Variables</i>	<i>First Period</i>	<i>Second Period</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>significance</i>
	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>			
Health Severity	0,49 (0,50)	0,34 (0,48)	2,683	387	$p<0,05$
Human Interest	0,67 (0,48)	0,21 (0,40)	6,013	238	$p<0,01$
Economic Consequences	0,71 (0,47)	0,39 (0,49)	2,318	71	$p<0,05$
Action	0,57 (0,50)	0,27 (0,45)	4,400	358	$p<0,01$
Reassurance	0,25 (0,45)	0,83 (0,39)	3,752	33	$p<0,01$
Leadership	0,44 (0,50)	0,24 (0,43)	2,375	143	$p<0,05$

By comparing the mean value of each frame, the results shown in Table 3, suggests that economic consequences (M=0.71, SD=0.47) and human interest (M=0.67, SD=0.48) frames dominated the coverage in the first period. In the second period, we observed that reassurance (M=0.83, SD=0.39) and economic consequences (M=0.39, SD=0.49) frames were the top two frames adopted in Turkish online news media. Reassurance (M=0.25, SD=0.45) and human interest (M=0.21, SD=0.40) frames were rarely used in the first and second periods respectively. Hypothesis 1 predicted a significant difference over two time spans in terms of how the frames are used. The results shown in Table 4 indicated that news frames; "health severity, human interest, economic consequences, action, reassurance, leadership showed significant differences over the two time spans and those periods are effective variables on the online coverage of the outbreak. H1 was supported. Considering the frames, the main differences between two periods were; health severity frame was used more in the first period (M=0.49, SD=0.50) than in the second period (M=0.34, SD=0.48); more human interest frames were used in the first period (M=0.67, SD=0.48) than in the second period (M=0.21, SD=0.40); economic consequences frame was used less often in the second period (M=0.39, SD=0.49) than the first period (M=0.71, SD=0.47); more action frames were used in the first period (M=0.57, SD=0.50) than the second period (M=0.27, SD=0.45); reassurance frame was used more often in the second period (M=0.83, SD=0.39) than the first period (M=0.25, SD=0.45); the leadership frame was used less often in the second period (M=0.24, SD=0.43) than the first period (M=0.44, SD=0.50).

4. Conclusion

This study applies framing analysis to examine how online Turkish media covered COVID-19 outbreak over two time spans and whether there were significant differences across time. Revealing considerable differences for all six news frames over two time spans, the study confirmed the predictions of framing theory addressing relationship between media routines and social context. Even in a time of crisis when the whole world is facing a global pandemic, significant differences exist in the way national media cover outbreak. The most likely reason for this difference in the epidemic coverage lies in the first COVID-19 case announced in Turkey on March 11, 2020. It is not surprising that while reassurance frame was rarely used in the first time span of the research, it dominated the coverage after the first case was reported in the country which may be regarded as a social

responsibility interest of the media. During crises, stability is a matter of utmost concern. Government's reassurance of the public may build confidence. Moreover, one of the top frames adopted in the first time span was human interest became the least used one in the second period. This indicates a less sensitive coverage in the second time span thus supporting the reassurance frame through reducing the severity of the outbreak. Economic consequences frame was used both often over two time spans. This frame might have been used to attract the public's attention to the financial problems resulting or would result from the outbreak rather than the health severity caused by the pandemic. Another difference between the news coverage across time may be due to Idlib Crisis when 33 Turkish soldiers were martyred in Syrian air raid on February 28, 2020 as the events related to that crisis were part of Turkish news coverage for several days which were included the first time span. It is therefore of 1242 online news articles, only 299 were related to the outbreak during that period. The result of this study is expected to enrich the studies on news content of epidemic coverage, however, it analysed online news texts only in one national news website but frames also exist in video materials. Although the period in which the study is conducted fits for the purpose to analyse the coverage of Covid-19 crisis in Turkey, the results cannot be considered to represent all the COVID-19 coverage in Turkish media. Future studies could be carried out to examine textual and visual materials and compare online and conventional media coverage in both national and international contexts to reach more comprehensive results.

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