

Editorial Salience and Topic Coverage of the “War on Terror”: Revisited for the Post-Withdrawal Era

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Abstract

In this paper, the study analyzed editorials from The New York Times (NYT) and Pakistan's Dawn, between 2001 and 2010. Of 181 NYT and 207 Dawn editorials relevant to the “War on Terror,” the study looked at how much attention each paper gave five topic areas: Al-Qaida, the Afghan Taliban (AT), Pakistan, the U.S. and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). To ask whether topic and newspaper were linked, a chi-square test of independence was applied. The results show that topic and newspaper were strongly related ($\chi^2(4, N = 388) = 34.01, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .30$). Dawn tended to write about the TTP; the NYT tended to write about Al-Qaida. And each paper tended to focus on different threats. In this paper, the study considers the findings from two decades ago in relation to the U.S. pullout of Afghanistan in 2021 and the U.S.-Pakistan Counterterrorism Dialogues since 2023. Taken together, the findings suggest a ranking of threats in the editorials. Both media outlets tended to worry more about threats at home than overseas. In many ways, this ranking reflected the political and media agenda in Pakistan at the time. Between 2011 and 2025, the study did not analyze editorials. But using material from U.S.-Pakistan diplomacy, the paper considers whether patterns in the editorials might still inform thinking about today about threats in that period. Where the study draws on external material, this is made clear.

Keywords: content analysis, War on Terror, Dawn, The New York Times, agenda-building, Pakistan-US relations

Introduction

Two decades on from 9/11, the editorial page remains a useful place to see how, over the course of a long conflict, the national press perceives the role of different actors. Editorials are unsigned, institutional statements from a newspaper. They need not follow the principle of objectivity. They can praise or criticize actors, discuss issues and suggest policy (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Whether and how often a newspaper writes about an actor or issue will reflect its own priorities, whatever the priorities of its government.

In this paper, the study looks at editorial content in two newspapers in two allied but troubled countries over the first decade of the war on terror (2001-10). They are Dawn, Pakistan's most widely read English-language newspaper, and The New York Times, a key paper of record in the

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U.S. In this paper, the research focuses on one aspect of their editorials: which of five themes of the war on terror (America's role, Pakistan's role, Al-Qaida, the Afghan Taliban and the TTP) each newspaper tended to pick up. And the paper asks whether they tended to pick up different themes.

Literature Review

Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media may not shape people's thinking, but they do shape what they think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). One way the media shape thinking is through editorial space. And this space is limited and is used selectively (Golan & Wanta, 2001). In studies of media coverage of terrorism in different countries, cross-national comparisons show that more often than not it is local threats that resonate in the media, even when distant threats are more significant (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003).

In one study of Pakistan, for example, Hussain and Jehangir (2023/2024) found that in coverage of the Taliban's capture of Afghanistan in 2021, U.S. media focused more on security risks for Pakistan than on issues of concern to them. That story appeared online in 2023 and in the print edition of the journal *Journalism* in 2024 (25(3)). In another study of media and government in Pakistan's "semi-democratic" setting, the authors found that, compared with internationally prominent figures, the media tended to focus more on local figures with domestic salience. They argued that in such cases, more people in the security forces and in the general population tended to be affected by these local figures. In work on coverage of the war on terror under the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations, Tarish, Abdalhakeem and Al Hasani (2022) found that in the U.S. media, much of the framing of presidential rhetoric focused on Al-Qaida and later, networks linked to ISIS. In U.S. outlets, this supported a storyline that 9/11 justified continued U.S. military action. And through this, such outlets fed into existing thinking (Tarish, Abdalhakeem, & Al Hasani, 2022).

A study of war on terror reporting in the NYT and Dawn by Hashmat and Rawan (2020) used content analysis of 100 news stories and editorials from each paper. To be fair to that study, it is important to note that it covered 2014-2016, not 2001-2010; it looked at news stories as well as editorials; and it coded frame type (e.g., conflict, economics, morality) and tone (favorable, unfavorable and neutral) rather than the five categories of militant actors used here. Among other things, Hashmat and Rawan (2020) found more unfavorable tone in the NYT's reporting of the war on terror than in that of Dawn. This supports the idea that the two newspapers tend to report on the war on terror in different ways. But it does not address the hypothesis of the present study. And its findings about tone and frame cannot easily be compared to the chi-square of topic categories reported below. Taken together, then, the two studies complement each other. They do not replicate each other.

Theoretical Framework

At a broad level, the study draws on agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). And at a more specific level, the analysis draws on scholars' argument that the choice of terrorism actor in different national media reflects threat salience and proximity to the actor in question (Norris et al., 2003).

The expectation, then, is that in its coverage of terrorism, each paper would be most likely to focus on the actor most directly threatening its own territory. That would be the TTP in Dawn and Al-Qaida (and its affiliates) in the NYT.

Methodology

The dataset is based on a census of editorials in The New York Times and Dawn over the period 2001-2010 that referred to the War on Terror. The study started with 650 editorials in Dawn and 528 in the NYT, each containing one or more of the keywords: war, terrorism, Al-Qaida, TTP, Afghan Taliban and militants. Through purposive sampling, editorials were selected that engaged with the War on Terror. The analytic sampling frame therefore included 207 from Dawn and 181 from the NYT.

Each of these editorials was assigned to one of five mutually exclusive themes, reflecting its main focus: By Pakistan, By America, By Al-Qaida, By TTP and By Afghan Taliban (AT). In line with standard practice in content analysis, reliability of coding was checked (Krippendorff, 1980; Kerlinger, 1986).

To explore whether the themes of the editorials differed between the two newspapers, a 2 (newspaper) by 5 (theme) chi-square test of independence was conducted on the frequencies. To indicate the strength of any association between newspaper and theme, Cramér's V is reported, a standard approach in content analysis.

Results

Table 1: Topic Category by Newspaper (Frequencies and Row Percentages)

Category	Dawn (n = 207)	NYT (n = 181)
By Pakistan	68 (32.9%)	56 (30.9%)
By America	52 (25.1%)	48 (26.5%)
By Al-Qaida	19 (9.2%)	41 (22.7%)
By TTP	43 (20.8%)	7 (3.9%)
By Afghan Taliban	25 (12.1%)	29 (16.0%)
Total	207 (100%)	181 (100%)

A chi-square test of independence showed a statistically significant relationship between topic category and newspaper, $\chi^2(4, N = 388) = 34.01$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .30 (i.e., a moderate relationship). Looking at standardized residuals, the analysis shows that this relationship comes down mainly to two cells: TTP editorials in Dawn (43, compared with a value of about 27 expected) and Al-Qaida editorials in the NYT (41, compared with a value of about 29 expected). Each paper wrote about the role of Pakistan and the U.S. at about the same rate (say, 25-33% in each). So it seems more likely that they differed in their coverage of non-state militants than in their coverage of their own government.

Dawn produced more editorials than the NYT (207 vs. 181). A binomial test of a 50/50 split between the two found no significant difference ($p = .204$). So while there is a difference in

number, it would be wrong to read this as a difference in appetite for the topic in the two newspapers.

Discussion

The link between subject and editorial in Dawn over the past decade reflects a logic of proximity supporting its editorial priorities. More than a fifth of its editorials over the decade dealt with the TTP and its attacks against citizens of Pakistan at home. That's more than five times the share of editorials in the NYT which mentioned the TTP. In the NYT, in contrast, attention to non-state actors tended to focus on al-Qaida, the group behind the attacks of September 11, which provided the basis for the "War on Terror" and its political legitimacy in the U.S.

In the years since the U.S. pulled out of Afghanistan in August 2021, a logic of proximity can be seen supporting U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism diplomacy. But it was not fixed. The first meeting of the Counterterrorism Dialogue was in March 2023. The second, in Washington in 10 May 2024, focused on the TTP and ISIS-Khorasan. Both were already prominent concerns for the U.S. and for Pakistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2024). At the third meeting, in Islamabad on 12 August 2025, for the first time the TTP, ISIS-Khorasan and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) were all included. And the day before, the U.S. State Department labeled the BLA a Foreign Terrorist Organization (The Diplomat, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). At the fourth meeting, in Washington on 4 August 2026, the U.S. State Department added al-Qaida to the list of groups -- along with the TTP, ISIS-Khorasan and BLA (U.S. Department of State, 2026; The Diplomat, 2026).

That pattern makes it harder to think of this as a situation in which each side raised its own threat. Looking at the editorial data for 2001-2010, one could imagine that in the press, the two governments discussed their own respective priorities. But in the joint statements, the scope of the common agenda is seen broadening over time. Initially the dialogue centered on U.S. concerns. And over time, Pakistan's (TTP, then BLA) were added to that, as well as a reference to al-Qaida in 2026. In other words, in this dialogue, more than in the press two decades earlier, each side increasingly saw in each other's threat something relevant to its own priorities. Neither institution necessarily dropped its own concern. But together, the agenda evolved. To some extent, then, parallels could be drawn between the findings here and those of 2001-2010. In the early statements, the priority threat for each side (and therefore the focus of each actor) is visible. But in more recent statements, it seems more likely that priorities converged than that they diverged.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The dataset covers editorial material from 2001 to 2010. In this period, news reports, opinion pieces from outside contributors, and commentary on social media and the web increasingly became important mechanisms of agenda-setting. A follow-up to this study might be an independent content analysis of editorials in the NYT and in Dawn on WOT over 2011-2025. Using the same five topic categories as in the study, this could explore whether, in different phases of the conflict (post-drone, post-Abbottabad and post-withdrawal), the hierarchy of topics in the study remained, faded or reversed. Such a study would not have been possible using the existing census dataset (2001-2010). Another limitation of the study, noted in Section 2, is that

the most relevant published study of coverage of the War on Terror in the two newspapers (Hashmat & Rawan, 2020) used a different period, unit of analysis and topic coding. Its findings could, however, support the finding that the coverage of the War on Terror tends to differ between the two papers. They would not necessarily support the findings about the specific topic-category pattern reported here.

Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2010, the topics covered in editorials in the New York Times and Dawn were not randomly distributed across the two newspapers. In general, each paper tended to focus on militant actors closest to its readers.

Topic and newspaper were significantly associated ($p < .001$, moderate effect size). This is consistent with other evidence that in general the framing of the War on Terror in these two newspapers would differ (Hashmat & Rawan, 2020). But that study looked at a different time period and used a different way of coding topics, so this could not really be seen as a replication of the findings here. In the years after 2010, in the early stages of U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism talks, a logic of proximity between the two sides is visible. But in more recent rounds of talks, each side increasingly found itself talking about similar threats. And in contrast to the findings here, their threat agendas are now more likely to overlap than diverge.

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