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## Elite Official Sources and the Coverage of the First Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of *Dawn* and *The News*

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**Abstract:** *This research study investigates the coverage of Dawn and The News during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand whom they relied on most to share the story of the COVID-19 pandemic with their readers. Sources cited or quoted in the news stories play a significant role in emphasizing the particular aspect of the coverage. The researchers studied the selected newspapers' news coverage for one month, from March 13, 2020, to April 13, 2020. The findings, based on the content analysis, reveal that both the selected mainstream newspapers relied more on the elite official sources to share the story of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic – by sidelining the general public, health experts and victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the newspapers failed to reflect on the issue through people's, victims, and health experts' voices. Thus, they faced failure to observe the diversity and investigative line in coverage.*

**Key Words:** Elite Sources, Dominance, Dawn, The News, COVID-19 Pandemic

### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it has resulted in the death of more than six million people worldwide (WHO, 2022) – besides bringing severe disturbance in people's social, cultural, political, and financial lives. Many scholars claim that the recent wave of inflation in the world is the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, too, as there were no business and financial activities.

Indeed, the infection emerged in Wuhan Chinese city, but it almost spread everywhere. In fact, with time, the people got used to it – but the first wave was the deadliest and most frightening one (UNICEF, 2020). During the first wave, the people also tried to practice caution by following the SOPs, but some did not. Most of such people did not believe in infection and took refuge in the prevailing

conspiracy theories. In Pakistan, the issue was more critical as even educated persons questioned the existence of the disease on different social media platforms. Thus, the people looked at the official narratives with a question and doubted health services given by the Pakistani government in different public sector hospitals.

In such a crisis, the role of media becomes vital to inform and educate people about the issue and counter any misperception existing among the people at the time. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that journalists initially focus on telling the readers what has happened and how to stay safe (CDC., 2017). It is understandable that journalists should initially inform the readers about the existing ground realities and safety rules as the causes of the crisis could be explained later to them. However, Ma (2005) asserts that superficial reporting of a crisis does not help the

general public. Therefore, journalists should approach the crisis in-depth and identify its root causes.

The in-depth reporting, aiming to empower people through information, could be ensured if the reporters contact different sources and collect information. Indeed, observing the diversity in sources helps people understand the issue from multiple perspectives – but it also enables the journalists to counter the dominance of an elite group on the coverage. Thus, they avoid them too to set the agenda of the coverage.

Thus, examining how *Dawn* and *The News* reported the Covid-19 pandemic to their readers becomes significant. The research questions answered in this research study are the following:

- Q1:** Which newspaper published more news stories related to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Q2:** Which newspaper published more byline stories related to the COVID-19?
- Q3:** Which newspaper named more sources in introducing their news stories?
- Q4:** On whom the newspapers relied on to tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic to its readers?

The answer to all these above questions would be helpful to understand the importance given by the selected newspapers to the COVID-19 pandemic, understand the dominance of different sources, and assess who was setting the agenda of the coverage by emphasizing their narratives to the readers. Thus, a total of 550 news stories appearing in *Dawn* and *The News* were collected, coded, and analyzed.

## Literature Review

[Fisher \(2018\)](#) claims that "source" means the source of information that shares material with the journalists that become a base of a news story. It includes any website containing important information or even any person or organization aware of events or issues and willing to share information. Such persons may belong to different walks of life in a society. He also claims that the power to include and exclude sources lies with the journalists and news media organizations. They have a powerful voice to decide what to include and what

to exclude and thus act as a "gatekeeper" of the information.

[Manninen \(2017\)](#) also asserts that the section on sources of information is based on the reliability, credibility and trustworthiness of a source and their shared information. [Tuchman \(1978\)](#) also asserts that 'truth' is the most decisive factor based on which the reporter selects a source. Still, he also claims that the source also claims 'credibility' – when his information is published in a news story.

However, [Hale \(1984\)](#) experimented with assessing how the users feel about the presence or absence of attribution in the news stories and whether they impact their evaluation? He divided the attribution into three categories: No attribution, general attribution, and specific attribution.

The findings revealed that attribution was less important to the readers, and it did not influence their perception of the nature of news stories.

Many scholars, including Hamilton and Crimsky (cited in Mogensen 2007, p.306), view that journalists should try their best to contact multiple sources related to the event or issue. It would help people have exposure to multiple views about the issue, and thus they would be able to make the right decisions for themselves.

Researchers worldwide have noticed that in the case of global conflict and global crisis, the journalists and media organizations have mainly shown reliance on the American officials and media organizations. A research study conducted by [Nord and Strömbäck \(2003\)](#) also testifies to this claim that their findings, based on the coverage of the 9/11 and US attacks in Afghanistan in Swedish media outlets, revealed that American officials showed dominance in their coverage. A research study conducted by [Marwan \(2015\)](#), while looking at Osama bin Laden's death coverage, also confirms it by claiming that American officials showed dominance in the coverage by overpowering the Pakistani government officials. The reason behind the US dominance in the coverage is that they lead to the "international flow of information" ([Thussu, 2000](#)).

The above discussion emphasizes that "Source" in journalism plays a vital role in constructing a news story. The structure of journalism stands on the sources. They provide newsworthy information to the reporters about different issues and events and

become a base of people's knowledge about those issues and events. Indeed, the power and authority lie with the journalists and news media organizations to select sources – but the power of the sources also can't be ruled out as they culturally define events and issues, and that also influences the perception and opinion of the people. This research study is also essential as it will enable us to understand who the two leading English-language newspaper reporters contacted and sought information from during the crucial first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Research Framework

The researchers have attempted to look at the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in *Dawn* and *The News*, which are also considered the highest circulated dailies of Pakistan. The researchers have looked at the issue's coverage in the selected newspapers from March 13, 2020, to April 13, 2020. The starting date is significant as COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in Pakistan on the day, and all educational institutions were closed. In contrast, the cut-off date shows that coronavirus infection was at its peak in Pakistan.

It was essential to look at the coverage of COVID-19 in *Dawn* and *The News*. They are both the highest circulated English-language newspapers in Pakistan and are admired by many for their professional coverage of issues. The researchers have managed to study the coverage on the two most important pages – front and back. Any news story containing the word coronavirus, COVID-19, corona, or pandemic was selected, coded, and then analyzed.

After selecting newspapers, the next step was to save the copies of the newspapers of the selected period. The researchers initially secured the data of the desired period by visiting the Archives department of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and then taking snapshots of the desired pages. After that, during the data collection period, the researchers searched the desired news stories on their respective newspaper websites where they felt necessary. The

reason was that some news stories were not readable, and thus the researchers relied on the digital version of the stories published on the newspapers' websites.

### Research Methodology

The researchers relied on the content to collect data to address all the questions of this research study. Content Analysis has been defined by different researchers, including [Berelson \(1952\)](#), who claims: A research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of the communication. [Holsti \(1968\)](#) supports the view by claiming that content analysis helps identify the characteristics in a text objectively and systematically. It means that if researchers want to collect the data through content analysis, they need to do it objectively and systematically. The researchers in this research project practiced the same and counted the number of words in a news story or identified sources in the news stories and then placed opinion over it – keeping in view the statistical data.

The researchers developed a coding sheet – keeping in view the variables of this research study. A pilot study was carried out to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Ten news stories were randomly selected, and an MPhil scholar was requested to code the data. Once the researchers ensured 95% reliability, it was utilized for the data collection.

### Findings/ Discussion

#### Number of Stories Published by *Dawn* and *The News*

This section reveals the coverage given by Dawn and The News to the issue – the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that out of 550 news stories, *The News* published 343 news stories while Dawn published 207 stories. The findings can be seen below in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Number of Stories Published by Dawn and the News

<i>Dawn</i>	207 38%
<i>The News</i>	343 62%

Total	550 100%
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### Coverage on different Pages

This section informs us about the strength of news stories appearing on the front and back pages. The primary aim of these findings is to understand the importance given by *Dawn* and *The News* to the

COVID-19 issue. Indeed, the most important page in the newspaper is the Front page – followed by the Back page. Thus, we would understand which newspaper valued the issue more. The findings are placed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** News Stories Appearing on Front and Back Pages

Name of a Newspaper	Front Page	Back Page	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	119 57.5%	88 42.5%	207 100%
<i>The News</i>	170 49.5%	173 50.5%	343 100%

The above findings demonstrate that *Dawn* slightly highlighted the issue more on its front page than *The News* newspaper – when their findings are compared with their overall coverage. Though both the newspapers gave significant coverage to COVID-19, *Dawn* slightly gave it more than *The News*. [Iyengar and Kinder \(1987\)](#) posit that by using priming, media attends to specific issues and leaves others. Thus, covering the pandemic more on the front-page

means allowing the readers to know about its existence or even updates related to it.

### Length of Coverage given to the COVID-19

This section informs us about the coverage given to the COVID-19 by both the *Dawn* and *The News* newspaper. The aim is to understand which newspaper published more lengthy stories out of their total coverage. The findings are placed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Length of different News Items appearing on different Pages

Name of a Newspaper	50-200 words news story	201-400 words news story	401 and above words news story	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	5 2.5%	32 15.5%	170 82%	207 100%
<i>The News</i>	54 15.5%	90 26.5%	199 58%	343 100%

The above findings demonstrate that *Dawn* emphasized the issue – COVID-19 – more than *The News* newspaper in terms of the number of words. The data shows that 82% of the news stories appearing on *Dawn's* front and back pages were of more than 400 words compared to the 58% of *The News*. It means that though *Dawn* quantitatively (in terms of the number of stories) gave less coverage to the issue than *The News*, it discussed the issue more thoroughly instead of publishing a greater number of stories about it. It also shows the culture of reporting in both *Dawn* and *The News* in which the former

avoids the words story, while the latter relies more on filler (few-paragraph stories) on its most important pages – front and back. 2.5% of news stories having a length of 200 words or less and appearing on the front and back pages of *Dawn*; on the other hand, 15.5% of news stories of the same length appearing on the same pages in *The News* support this argument. As mentioned by different authors, including [Price and Tewksbury \(2007\)](#), media coverage changes the standards based on which people make decisions. Therefore, informing the people in bits and pieces about COVID-19 also

increases the chances that people might wrongly interpret the issue or miss its holistic picture. Thus, the people may be unable to make a sensible decision about the COVID-19 – keeping in view the coverage of the selected newspapers.

### Byline Coverage of *Dawn* and *The News*

This section informs us about the byline news stories published by *The News* and *Dawn* – while telling the story of COVID-19 to the readers. Byline news stories refer to those that appear with a reporter's or

reporters' name at the top of the story. The byline news stories are considered credit and reward for the journalists. The newspapers in Pakistan publish the news stories byline when the reporters have tried to add exclusive information to the news stories. The 'exclusive' information element makes the byline stories more attractive and significant for the readers. Thus, this section helps us inform which newspapers struggled more to share the exclusive information with their readers, and it would be visible by counting the number of byline news stories. The findings are placed in Table 4 below.

**Table 4.** Number of byline Stories

Name of a Newspaper	Byline News Stories	Not Byline News Stories	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	130 63%	77 37%	207 100%
<i>The News</i>	101 29.5%	242 70.5%	343 100%

The above data demonstrates that *Dawn* gave more space to byline news stories than *The News* – while sharing the story of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan. The data shows that almost two-thirds (63%) of the news stories appearing in *Dawn* were published byline. On the other hand, less than one-third of the news stories of *The News* was published byline. Earlier, it was noticed that *The News* emphasized the issue – the pandemic – more than *Dawn* by publishing more news stories. However, this data shows us another picture of the coverage.

The findings reflect that *Dawn* shared more exclusive information with its readers than *The News* newspaper. It gives us the impression that the reporters of *Dawn* struggled more to collect the exclusive information related to COVID-19 than *The News* newspaper. It also sheds light on *Dawn's* policy of sharing reliable information by involving the struggle of its own reporters.

It is hard to speculate on the causes of these findings, but apparently, it seems that reporters of *Dawn* were more functional, active, and possibly resourceful in collecting and sharing information related to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few years back, *The News*, which is part of the Jang

Media Group, also carried out the downsizing in various bureaus across Pakistan. It might have an impact on the quality and quantity of their reporting. *Dawn* also introduced cuts on their employees' salaries, but it did not fire any employee. This reason might have contributed to the byline reporting of the issue by the selected newspapers.

### Source Cited in the Introduction of News Stories

This section informs us about the number of sources cited by *Dawn* and *The News* in the introduction of their stories. In this research study, source means any person, organization, or country – cited for the information and mentioned by the reporters in the intro of the stories.

The importance of sources in journalism cannot be ruled out. Many researchers claim that journalism stands on sources, and it is challenging to execute the job without sources. Reporters contact their sources regarding different events related to COVID-19 and then try to make sense of them and share them with their readers. It is also significant to remember that the absence of sources in the news stories also leaves the impression on readers that the newspapers have

tried to speculate their biases to the readers. On the one hand, if sources contribute to the credibility of

the reporters and news organizations, their absence undermines it. The findings are placed below in table 5.

**Table 5.** Source Cited in the Introduction of a News Story

Name of a Newspaper	Source Cited	Source Not Cited	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	82	125	207
	39.5%	60.5	100%
	209	134	343
<i>The News</i>	61%	39%	100%

The above findings demonstrate that *The News* cited more sources in the introduction of their stories than *Dawn*. It is clear from the table that 61% of the stories of *The News* carried the sources in the introduction of their stories than *Dawn*s almost 40%. This shows that *The News* stayed more professional than *Dawn* while narrating the events related to the COVID-19 to the readers. It is now essential to look at the sources cited by *Dawn* and *The News* in their coverage.

### Source Named in the Introduction of a News Story

This section deals with the naming of the source in the introduction of a news story. It means the source's identity is cited by the reporter in the news stories. It will help us understand which sources were quoted by the reporters in telling the story of COVID-19 to the readers. On the one hand, we would understand the reliance of newspapers on a particular source. On the other hand, it would also reveal what sources were ignored or less quoted by the reporters in their coverage.

It is also significant to mention here that initially, the researchers collected the data from the different

news stories through a coding sheet by writing the source in the relevant section of the coding sheet. Later, the researchers divided the sources into eleven broader categories. It includes federal government sources, provincial government sources, WHO, international organizations, etc. The purpose of merging the different sources was to have a broader view of the coverage.

The following examples randomly selected from the coverage will help us know how sources were coded in the lead of the news stories.

a) The coronavirus pandemic is threatening the entire human race, the United Nations warned on Wednesday as it launched a humanitarian response plan featuring an appeal for \$2 billion to help the world's poorest and most vulnerable people". It was put in the category International Organization.

b) "The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has taken up a complaint relating to the export (alleged to be smuggling) of personal protective equipment PPE especially face masks from Pakistan to China, which Beijing has managed with lots of efforts". It was put in the category Federal Government Official/Minister. The findings are placed below in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Source Named in the Introduction of a News Story

Name of a Newspaper	Federal Government Official/ Minister	Provincial Government Official Minister	Health/ Medical Expert (Local/ Foreign)	WHO	Int 1 Org	Foreign Office Pakistan	Corona Infected/ Recovered Patients	General Public	Opposition Political Parties	Courts	Foreign	Total
<i>Dawn</i>	43 52.5%	4 5%	0 0%	2 2.5%	14 17%	3 3.5%	0 0%	0 0%	5 6%	5 6%	6 7%	82 100%

Name of a Newspaper	Federal Government Official/ Minister	Provincial Government Official Minister	Health/ Medical Expert (Local/ Foreign)	WHO	Int 1 Org	Foreign Office Pakistan	Corona Infected/ Recovered Patients	General Public	Opposition Political Parties	Courts	Foreign	Total
<i>The News</i>	77 37%	45 21.5%	9 4.5%	0 0%	17 8%	3 1.5%	0 0%	3 1.5%	22 10.5%	17 8%	16 7.5%	209 100%

The above findings demonstrate that in its coverage of COVID-19, *Dawn* relied more on the federal government sources, followed by the international organizations, foreign officials, opposition political parties, and courts. The federal government makes more than half of the sources cited by *Dawn*, which means that they were mostly looking at the federal government for their coverage. Indeed, the visibility of the Pakistani government in this crisis can also be seen in the above findings. It means that the federal government was aware of the crisis and was taking all the due steps necessary for the survival of the people. Similarly, one can also see the visibility of international and UN organizations in the coverage, besides foreign officials. This also means that the international perspective, related to the issue, was also shared with the readers, besides informing them about the situation in Pakistan.

However, despite all these coverage strengths, the newspaper failed to cite the general public (ordinary citizens) and COVID-infected patients, besides health/medical experts. It means that *Dawn* did not share peoples' stories through peoples' voices. The researchers are aware that conspiracy theories were in circulation at that time and it could be only countered by sharing the voices of people or COVID-infected/recovered patients or even sharing the opinion of the medical/health experts – but they have got zero coverage in the opening of *Dawn's* stories. It demonstrates that *Dawn* was reporting the events the way it was unfolding, without bothering to think critically about them.

On the other hand, *The News* used sources slightly differently by giving the provincial government officials more space on its front and back pages. They also gave the health/medical experts slightly more space – besides citing three general public sources. However, the statistics are not that significant in numbers to claim that they performed

far better than *Dawn*. Furthermore, the absence of virus-infected/recovered patients voices in the introduction of stories also reflects that the newspaper did not consider it essential to start the story with their voices to counter conspiracy theories prevailing among the public.

The comparative analysis of both the newspapers shows that they both relied more on the official sources to open the story for their readers – besides looking at the foreign and international organizations. Reliance on elite official sources for information brings bias to the coverage, allowing them to manipulate the situation according to their needs. Since this research study looks at the coverage of the selected newspapers – *Dawn* and *The News* – on front and back pages, and the absence of people, health experts, and infected victims' voices in the introduction of their stories throws light on the gaps that exist in the coverage of our English-language newspapers.

[Iyengar and Kinder \(1987\)](#) explain that in priming, media attend to specific issues and ignore others. Furthermore, [Price and Tewksbury \(1997\)](#) also add that media makes specific issues more accessible than others. To highlight the particular aspect of the issue or make it dominant to the people, the media will get the information from other sources. Thus, relying much on the exact nature of sources highlights the bias and policy of the media organizations favoring the particular nature of information over others. It has serious consequences on the readers, making specific sources and perspectives more dominant than others. It does not even allow them to have a holistic picture of the issue or a more balanced view or decision.

### Additional Sources Cited in the Body of a News Story

This section informs us about the first two additional

sources quoted or cited in the body of a news story. It would help us know that after intro on what sources the two selected newspapers – Dawn and The News – relied on telling the story about the first wave of COVID-19 in Pakistan to its readers. Again, it would show us the emphasis of the selected newspapers on particular sources to tell the story and leave us with a mandate to reflect on the sources not much quoted in the coverage. It is significant to mention that the researchers have only looked at the first two sources quoted by the reporter in the body of a news story. It means that if more than two sources were cited in any news story, the researchers only collected the data of the first two sources.

As mentioned previously, the researchers wrote down the different sources in the relevant section of

the coding sheet. Once the data was collected, the researchers merged the values and broadly categorized them into 11 sources to have a more holistic picture of their citation. The following examples, randomly selected from the coverage, gives us a sense of the data collection.

a) Shahbaz demanded that the government set up makeshift quarantine facilities in marriage halls, mosques, schools and colleges to accommodate COVID-19 patients. However, he said the coronavirus patients should not be stigmatized and must be treated with compassion. He asked for conducting coronavirus tests free of cost. It was put in the category Opposition Political Parties. The findings are placed below in table 7.

Table 7. Additional Sources Cited in the Body of a News Story

Name of Newspaper	Federal Government Official/Minister	Provincial Government Official Minister	Health/Expert (Local/Foreign)	WHO	Int 1 Org	Foreign Pakistan Office	Corona Infected/Recovered Patients	General Public	Opposition Political Parties	Courts	Foreign	Total
Dawn	104 38.5%	34 12.5%	24 9%	8 3%	22 8%	15 5.5%	0 0%	7 2.5%	11 4%	8 3%	6 13%	269 1100%
The News	96 31.5%	76 25%	28 9%	4 1%	13 4%	6 2%	2 0.5%	17 5.5%	7 2.5%	17 5.5%	9 13%	305 1100%

The above findings reflect that The News quoted slightly more sources in the body of a news story than Dawn. However, the difference is not much significant. It is also evident from the findings that both the newspapers tried to rely on the same kind of sources to share the information with the people.

The findings based on the utilization of sources by Dawn reveals that the federal government tops the slot, followed by foreign forces, provincial government sources, and then health/medical experts. Again, it means that Dawn was substantially relying on the official sources at all the three levels – foreign, federal, and provincial – to tell the story of COVID-19. However, in the body of news stories, they did cite the health/medical experts opinion and then shared it with their readers. Though the statistics are not much significant – but it seems important to talk about the disease, its causes, or preventions through their voices. It helps the

reporters to talk about the disease in a much more scientific way by countering the conspiracy theories circulating among the public.

The absence of infected/recovered patients from the coverage – besides the presence of a smaller number of ordinary citizens – also leaves a question mark on the credibility of the coverage. Sharing the peoples miseries through the lens of elite sources and ignoring the local victims or ordinary citizens voices does not leave a good impression about the soundness of the coverage. The researchers are confident that quoting more common people or infected/recovered patients would have built people's trust in the information and helped dispel any conspiracy theory.

The coverage of The News is slightly different from Dawn's. Though they too cited the federal government, provincial government, and foreign



officials to tell the story, they cited slightly more general public and health/medical experts – besides citing two infected/recovered patients. It means the official bias is dominant in *The News*, too; however, they performed a bit better than *Dawn*.

It is also observed that the selected Pakistani newspapers, in their coverage of COVID-19, did not carry the voice of infected/recovered patients – besides ordinary citizens to share the stories with their perspective. Front and back pages are considered the most important ones in a newspaper, and the absence or less citation of such sources opens the coverage to criticism. It was much needed that the newspapers should have cited both these sources in much abundance to counter conspiracy theories.

Earlier, it was debated that mass media could influence people's decisions about different issues they face in life as media outlets explore such issues from different dimensions ([Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006](#)). Contacting various sources related to the issue allows the readers to make themselves aware of the multiple perspectives connected to the issue. Relying on particular sources and omitting others certainly gives the former more power to define things related to the issue the way they want. Thus, they exert their power on readers' minds, too, as they consider only those perspectives seriously, which are highlighted and emphasized by the media.

The aim of the media should be to inform and educate people. It is also true that people do learn from other people's experiences having the same issue or problem. Thus, not telling the story from the perspectives of those who suffered from the disease or even common people deprive readers of some genuine perspectives of the coverage. Thus, the media limits the horizon of people's thinking –

related to an issue. It seems true in this research study.

## Conclusion

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This research study investigated the coverage of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in *Dawn* and *The News*, the highest circulated broadsheet English-language newspapers of Pakistan, with a focus on understanding that did they share the people's issue through people's voices to make them understand of the issue in a much better way. The findings revealed that the selected newspapers relied much on the elite official sources at local, national, and international levels and shared the updates related to the COVID-19. The reliance on the official sources has resulted in an 'official' bias in the coverage, and thus it deprived the readers of multiple perspectives related to the issue.

The researchers feel that in a country like Pakistan, where people already doubted the infection, it was much needed that the selected newspapers should have explored the issue from the people's, victims', and health experts' perspectives – but unfortunately, it was missing. Indeed, front and back pages play a vital role in bringing awareness about the issue among the readers. However, the findings reflected that the selected newspapers did not have any strategy in hand to utilize it. The researchers feel that it is much needed that in future, God forbid if such a health emergency revisits the country – it is much expected of the Pakistani media to have a helpful strategy in hand by collecting information from the different sources to share the updates with the people to have more sound and holistic view of the issue.

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