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COVID-19 AND HEALTH COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF TELANGANA'S PRINT MEDIA

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Abstract: Coronavirus first emerged in a man on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China. Authorities identified the virus as being transmitted through a seafood market in Wuhan. As the virus spread to nearly all countries worldwide, the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. This contagious virus caused severe distress among people globally. During this time, effective risk communication became the utmost significant challenge for health officials to contain and prevent the virus's spread. Many believe that newspapers in India play a crucial role during such crises. Therefore, newspapers should provide facts and figures and information on how to prevent infection and avoid spreading the virus.

This research explores how Telugu newspapers in Telangana covered the news about the coronavirus pandemic and whether they provided preventive measures to help prevent its spread. We analysed the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Telugu newspapers using content analysis of 1,633 articles published in two Telugu newspapers between 25 March 2020 and 14 April 2020. The articles consistently published facts and figures about coronavirus-positive cases, deaths, and active cases. These newspapers often used government authorities as sources of information and published significant news on preventive and control measures.

This content analysis revealed that Telugu newspapers published many articles on preventive and control measures. However, they tended to focus more on the activities of officials, politicians, and celebrities rather than emphasising the impact on marginalised sections of society.

Keywords: Content analysis, COVID-19, Telugu newspapers, Articles, Health risk communication.

Introduction: The role of mass media in risk communication is invaluable. Media coverage of health crises is crucial in alerting government officials and the general public. Most people access mass media for information about health crises (Lowrey et al., 2006). Consequently, the general public becomes informed about government decisions and precautionary measures to mitigate health risks. However, mass media is sometimes accused of amplifying health risks and causing public panic by misinterpreting scientific evidence, which can erode public trust in evidence-based research.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), risk communication refers to "the exchange of real-time information, advice, and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic, or social well-being" (WHO, 2020). Communication about health hazards to the general public is essential during pandemics like COVID-19. George Gerbner's cultivation theory in media effects research explains that people exposed to media content for extended periods are significantly influenced by it (Gerbner, 1976). Therefore, it is essential to investigate mass media content to assess the types and extent of health hazard coverage.

This research study conducted a content analysis to examine the health hazard content reported by Telugu newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Telangana.

COVID-19 Pandemic: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is caused by a newly emerged coronavirus. As documented in the WHO Timeline-COVID-19, the virus emerged in Wuhan, Hubei Province, on December 31, 2019, and eventually spread worldwide, primarily through international travel, infecting people in 213 countries and territories. The first official case of COVID-19 outside China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020 (WHO, 2020).

In India, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on January 30, 2020, in Kerala (Economic Times, 2020). In Telangana, the first case was reported on March 2, 2020 (Sakshi, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has killed at least 204,987 people globally, with a total of 2,995,758 positive cases as of April 29, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Telangana's tally of positive cases stood at 1,004 as of April 28, 2020, showing a downward trend in positive cases over the previous four days (India Today, 2020). Telangana announced its first COVID-19-related death on March 27, 2020, from a patient with no travel history abroad. Following this, the death toll in Telangana reached 25 as of April 29, 2020 (Henry, 2020).

Review of literature: Mass media is crucial for health risk communication during pandemics. In reviewing the literature on pandemics such as the Bubonic plague, Spanish flu, Asian flu, and HIV/AIDS in the 20th century, we found limited content analysis articles with sparse information. However, there is extensive literature on pandemics in the 21st century, mainly focusing on international media reporting.

Previous research on crisis communication by Japanese national newspapers during the H1N1 influenza pandemic found that these newspapers reported more factual information but frequently omitted information on preventive measures, which are essential for the public. Additionally, during the early stages of the pandemic, these newspapers published more front-page articles about H1N1, resulting in less coverage of other events. The repetition of information also led to decreased public caution (Kato & Ishikawa, 2016)

In Malaysia, Sualman et al. (2012) conducted a content analysis of three newspapers based in Klang Valley over six and a half months. The study found that Malaysian newspapers focused mainly on national and regional policies and responsibilities, while providing less coverage of basic preventive measures and public awareness regarding the H1N1 pandemic.

Print media plays a key role in understanding the severity of COVID-19 and spreading awareness. It is particularly effective in providing accurate information and addressing readers' queries (Panday et al., 2020). In Australia, research by Fogarty et al. (2011) examined five television news channels and found that 63.4% of news broadcasts focused on the severity of the pandemic, 23.6% on government assurances, and 12.9% on providing advice to viewers.

In the United States, a group of mass media researchers conducted content analysis on six national newspapers, including online editions, during the first five months of the H1N1 pandemic. They argued that the newspapers did not fully cover stories about the seriousness of the symptoms and the disease (Goodall et al., 2012).

As of today, the literature review found that Internationally, there are some scholarly journal articles of content analysis studies that have analyzed print media coverage of pandemics i.e., H1N1 influenza, HIV/AIDS. But, there is no research paper on the Telugu newspaper reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak in scientific journals.

Print media has been used as a fair medium tool to circulate information during the earlier pandemics of the 21st century. Given that, with the available content, we analyze published news articles about coronavirus in the print media of Telangana during COVID-19.

Research Questions:

1. How far the Telugu newspapers spread information related to preventive measures through the print news medium?
2. What is the frequency of news related to health risk during the COVID-19 pandemic in Telugu newspapers?
3. What kind of articles are mainly published other than health risk-related articles?
4. What are the sources of the risk communication published in Telugu newspapers?

Research methodology:

For this analysis of Telugu newspaper articles during the COVID-19 pandemic, we employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods. Quantitative content analysis was used to analyse communication messages systematically. As Allen (2017) states, "Content analysis is a quantitative process for analysing communication messages that follow specific processes. In many communication studies, scholars determine the frequency of specific ideas, concepts, terms, and other message characteristics and make comparisons to describe and explain communicative behaviour." Additionally, qualitative analysis was utilised to interpret the health risk communication conveyed by the Telugu newspapers.

Sample:

Two Telugu newspapers, Sakshi and Vaartha, were selected for this study. The content analysis covered a time frame from 25 March 2020 to 14 April 2020. All articles concerning health risks that were published in these newspapers were included in the study.

Although various methods for sample selection exist, the convenience sampling method was used for selecting newspapers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, India imposed restrictions on vehicle movement, hindering the distribution of physical copies of newspapers. Consequently, only a few newspaper organisations provided e-newspapers on their websites, necessitating convenience sampling for this study.

Data Analysis

After conducting the quantitative content analysis, we analysed the results using descriptive statistics. This included calculating the total percentage of news coverage in each category and the number of articles per category. COVID-19 news articles and articles on health risks were classified into thirteen significant themes.

Results:

The content analysis reveals the following distribution of news articles published from March 25, 2020, to April 14, 2020:

Preventive and Control Measures: 21% of the articles focused on preventive and control measures, representing the highest percentage compared to other categories (See Figure 3).

Official Statements: 15.9% of the articles were about official statements from the central and state governments and international bodies.

Updates on COVID-19 Statistics: 11.94% of the articles provided regular updates on global COVID-19 statistics, including positive cases, deaths, and active cases.

Migrant Labourers: 8.39% of the articles addressed issues related to migrant labourers.

Donations: A similar percentage of articles discussed donations from public and private organisations and the general public.

Lockdown and Violations: 6.67% of the articles focused on the nationwide lockdown and instances of its violation.

Disease Nature, Frontline Warriors, Food, and Agriculture categories accounted for approximately the same percentage of articles (See Figure 3).

Politics: 4.72% of the articles during the initial 21-day lockdown period were related to political matters.

Higher Risk Groups: 3.06% of the articles covered groups at higher risk during the pandemic.

Treatment and Vaccine Development: Only 0.9% of the articles discussed treatment for COVID-19 patients, vaccines, and research and development, indicating the least priority given to these topics.

The high percentage of articles on preventive and control measures highlights the media's focus on disseminating essential information to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The significant coverage of official statements underscores the importance of authoritative guidance during the pandemic. Regular updates on COVID-19 statistics provided the public with crucial information about the pandemic's progression. The attention given to migrant labourers and donations reflects societal concerns and community support during the crisis. However, the relatively low coverage of treatment and vaccine development suggests a gap in information dissemination regarding medical advancements and preparedness.

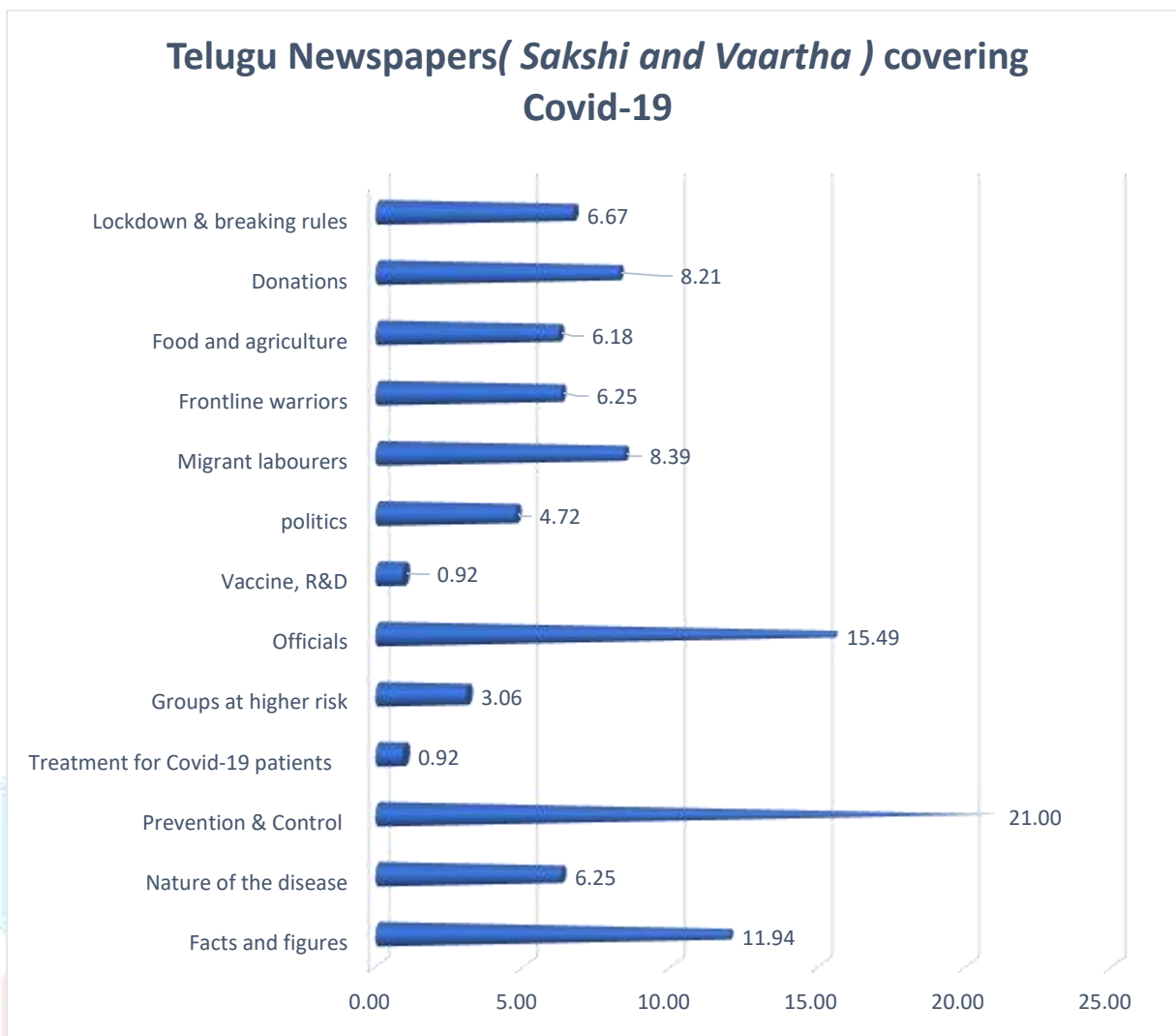


Figure: 1

The content analysis of the Telugu newspaper Sakshi reveals the following distribution of news articles related to COVID-19 from March 25, 2020, to April 14, 2020:

Prevention and Control Measures: About 25.7% of the articles were related to coronavirus prevention and control, representing the highest percentage of news coverage among all categories (See Figure 2).

Official Statements: 13.23% of the articles were focused on official statements from the central and state governments and international bodies.

COVID-19 Facts and Figures: To provide regular updates on the global COVID-19 situation, Sakshi published 10.86% of its articles on facts and figures related to the disease.

Nature of the Disease: Recognizing the public's need for information about the disease, 8.26% of the articles covered the nature of COVID-19.

Donations and Migrant Labourers: Both categories were covered by approximately the same percentage of news articles (See Figure 2).

Frontline Warriors and Lockdown Violations: Each category accounted for 6.56% of the articles.

Food and Agriculture: 5.66% of the articles focused on issues related to food and agriculture.

Politics: Surprisingly, only 3.51% of the articles were related to political matters.

Higher Risk Groups: Despite the importance of highlighting vulnerable populations, only 2.83% of the articles were focused on groups at higher risk.

Treatment for COVID-19 Patients: A mere 1.02% of the articles discussed treatment options for COVID-19 patients.

Vaccine Research and Development: The least covered category, with only 0.9% of the articles focusing on vaccines, research, and development.

The high percentage of articles on prevention and control measures indicates the newspaper's emphasis on informing the public about ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The coverage of official statements highlights the reliance on authoritative sources for guidance. Regular updates on COVID-19 statistics informed readers about the pandemic's progression. The coverage of the disease's nature aimed to educate the public about the virus, addressing widespread misinformation.

The relatively low coverage of topics such as treatment, vaccine development, and higher-risk groups suggests areas where the newspaper could improve to provide a more balanced and comprehensive portrayal of the pandemic. This analysis indicates the need for more extensive coverage of medical advancements and the specific challenges vulnerable populations face.

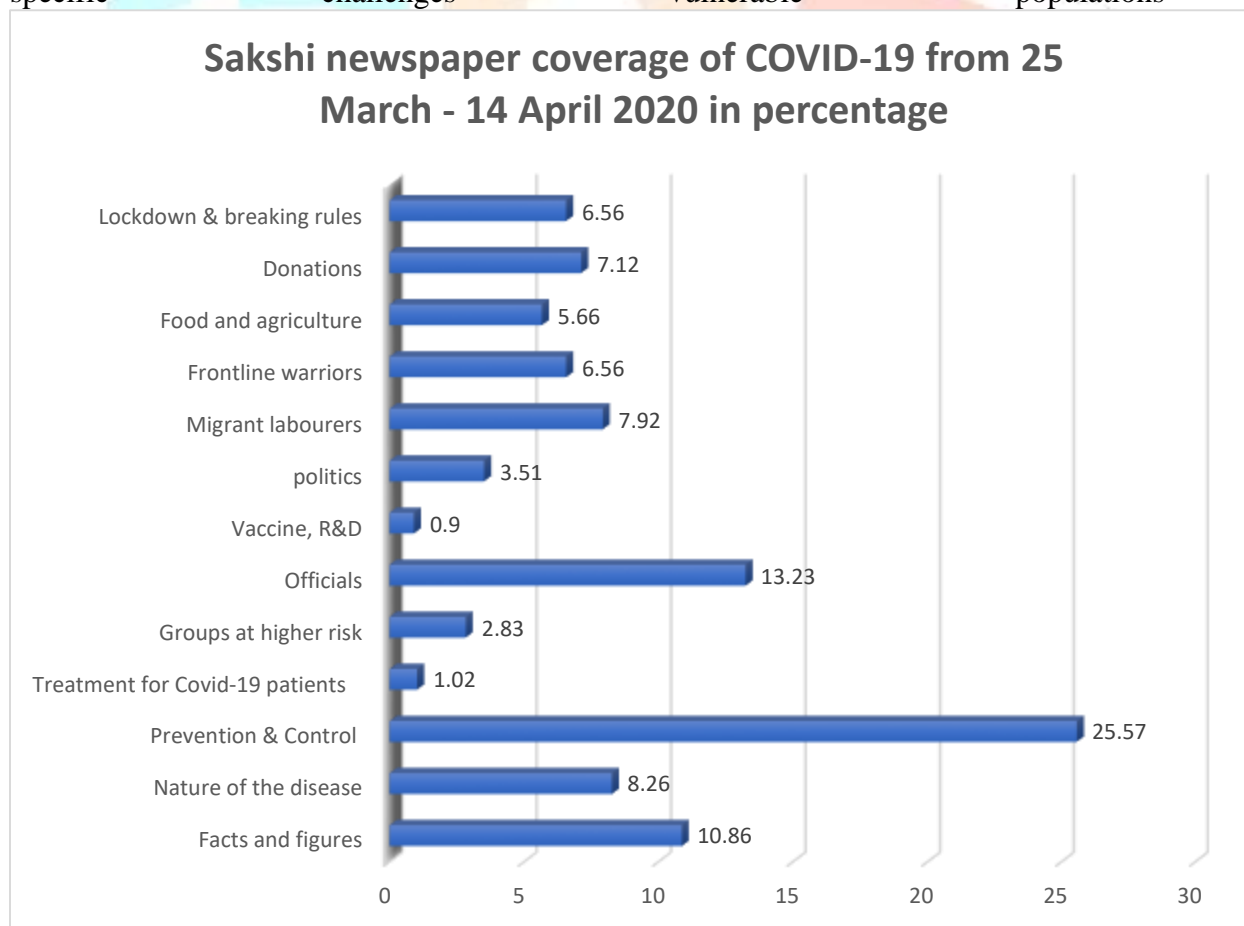


Figure: 2

During the period from March 25, 2020, to April 14, 2020, the Telugu newspaper Vaartha covered COVID-19-related news articles as follows:

Official Statements: Vaartha newspaper featured official statements from central and state governments and international organisations, with 18.16% of its news articles dedicated to this category (See Figure 3).

Prevention and Control Measures: The newspaper also prioritised news on COVID-19 prevention and control, publishing 15.62% of its articles on this critical topic.

Donations: 9.48% of the articles focused on donations made by individuals and organizations towards COVID-19 relief efforts.

Migrant Labourers: Coverage on the challenges faced by migrant labourers during the pandemic accounted for 8.95% of the news articles.

Food and Agriculture: Equally significant coverage was given to issues related to food and agriculture, with 6.81% of the articles addressing these concerns. Similarly, the newspaper published 6.81% of its articles on violations of lockdown rules and regulations.

Politics: Vaartha covered political aspects related to COVID-19 in 6.14% of its news articles.

Nature of the Disease: Despite the importance of understanding the disease, only 3.87% of the articles focused on explaining the nature and characteristics of COVID-19.

Groups at Higher Risk: Almost the same percentage of news articles (approximately equal to 3.87%) addressed the vulnerabilities of groups at higher risk during pandemics (See Figure 3).

Vaccine Research and Development: The newspaper allocated less than 1% of its coverage to news related to vaccine research, development, and related updates.

Vaartha's coverage indicates a strong emphasis on disseminating official information and updates from authorities, reflecting its role in providing reliable news during the pandemic. The significant coverage of prevention and control measures underscores the newspaper's efforts to educate and guide the public on ways to combat COVID-19. Coverage on donations and migrant labour issues highlights societal responses and challenges faced by vulnerable populations. However, areas such as the nature of the disease, groups at higher risk, and vaccine research received relatively less attention. These areas are crucial for public understanding and preparedness during a health crisis and could benefit from increased coverage in future reporting.

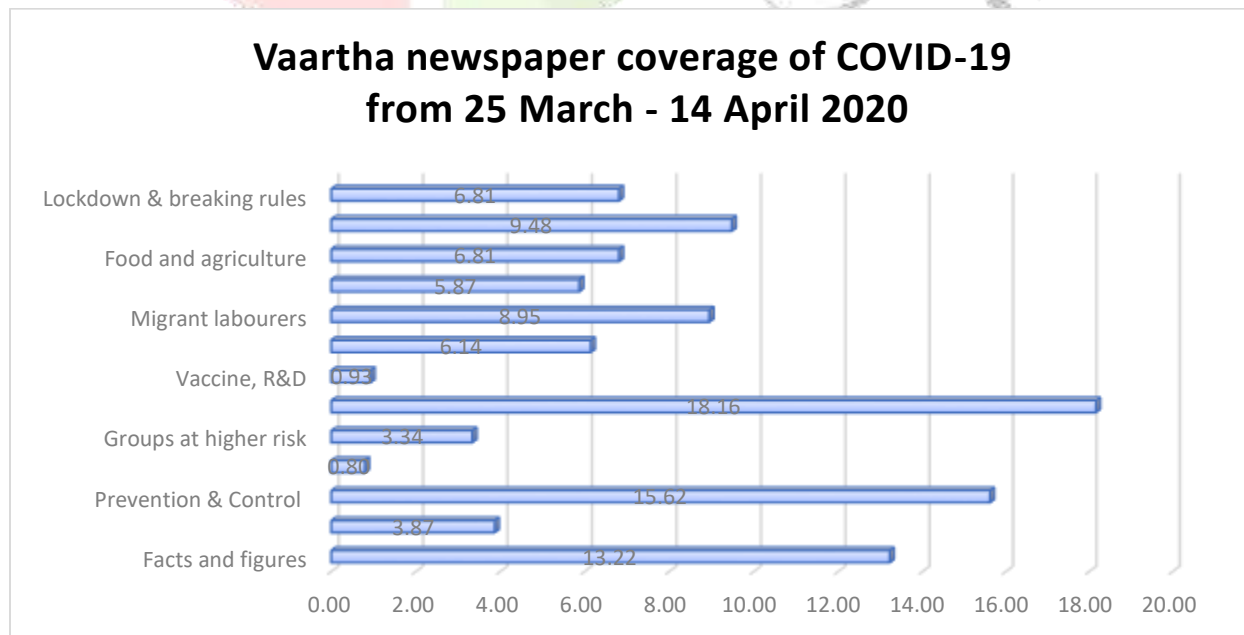


Figure: 3

Discussion: During times of crisis, the media plays a pivotal role in informing and educating the public, serving as a vital catalyst for disseminating crucial information ranging from factual updates to essential preventive measures. This study analyses articles published in Sakshi and Vaartha newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on their contributions to risk communication.

The newspapers have increasingly prioritised articles on prevention and control measures, constituting 21% of their coverage. In contrast, political developments received less attention, comprising only 4.72% of published articles. Sakshi, in particular, emphasised standard precautions, self-quarantine, and sanitation more prominently than Vaartha. This disparity reflects differences in editorial priorities between widely and less circulated newspapers. Research indicates a consistent coverage of COVID-19 statistics such as cases, deaths, recoveries, and active cases globally and locally, initially dispersed across different pages but later consolidated for easier access. However, articles addressing the nature of the disease, its transmission modes, and symptoms were relatively sparse, indicating a need for greater public awareness in these areas.

Coverage on COVID-19 treatment, drug use, and plasma therapy was initially limited, possibly due to restricted access to healthcare facilities during the lockdowns. Articles focusing on vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, elderly individuals, and those with pre-existing health conditions were notably scarce, comprising only 3.06% of the total coverage. This highlights a critical gap in addressing these populations' specific risks during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the newspapers preferred reporting statements from local and state authorities over national and international bodies, underscoring their role in prioritising regional perspectives in crisis reporting. Migrant workers, significantly impacted by the pandemic, received consistent coverage across both newspapers, reflecting 8.39% of their combined coverage.

Conclusion: This study highlights the pivotal role of newspaper communication during the early stages of the pandemic, where images of individuals from various sectors—local, national, and international officials—adhering to social distancing measures and wearing masks were prominently featured.

Telugu newspapers in Telangana dedicated substantial coverage to coronavirus-related topics, particularly emphasising preventive and control measures. This underscores their recognition of these measures as critical news items during the pandemic's onset, suggesting effective crisis communication strategies by the newspapers. However, while the coverage on factual information about COVID-19 was extensive, articles on treatment options received less attention despite their significant public interest. Moreover, there was a noticeable disparity in coverage concerning marginalised sections of society; newspapers focused more on elite figures, politicians, and businessmen. This calls for a reassessment of editorial priorities to ensure equitable representation of marginalised groups in media coverage.

The study also reveals limited reporting on drug usage and vaccine development (See Figure 1), crucial for understanding treatment options and vaccine progress for COVID-19. Future research should investigate the underlying reasons behind this lack of coverage to improve public awareness and understanding.

It's important to note some limitations of this content analysis. The study only analysed articles from Telugu daily newspapers, specifically examining 21 issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the overwhelming volume of COVID-19-related articles during this period, analysing all newspaper issues was impractical. Additionally, Sunday editions and special supplements, such as cartoons, advertisements, puzzles, and unique feature pages, were excluded from the analysis.

These limitations provide context to the findings and underscore the need for comprehensive and inclusive media coverage during public health crises.

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