

Online Media Narratives and the Digital Spectacle of Hyper-Nationalism: Post-Pahalgam Attack

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack on April 22 and India's subsequent military response through *Operation Sindoor*, digital media narratives have demonstrated a noticeable shift from journalistic restraint to hyper-nationalist spectacle. This paper critically examines the role of online media in framing military operations and conflict with Pakistan, questioning whether the media operates as a responsible watchdog or a rhetorical war dog in times of national crisis. Drawing on a content analysis of 16 news reports sourced from the Google News database using the keywords "Operation Sindoor" and "Post Pahalgam India-Pak Conflict," the study identifies recurring themes such as war glorification, binary enemy construction, and digital calls for revenge. While official statements by the Ministry of Defence emphasize precision and restraint, media accounts tend to amplify conflict rhetoric, fuelling emotional responses and undermining nuanced discourse. The analysis is organized across five critical narrative lenses: *war narrative*, *hyper-nationalist narratives*, *foreign media portrayal*, *fake news and misinformation*, and *conflict resolution discourse*. The findings raise urgent questions about media ethics, responsibility, and the consequences of turning national security into digital theatre. This paper underscores the need for more critical engagement with how online journalism constructs conflict and influences public sentiment in a volatile geopolitical context.

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Media Narratives, War Journalism, Operation Sindoor, Pahalgam Attack, Digital Spectacle, Hyper-nationalism, Online News Media

Introduction

The relationship between media and conflict has been a subject of critical scrutiny, particularly in South Asia, where the India-Pakistan rivalry often becomes a theatre for media sensationalism and nationalistic fervour. The Pahalgam terror attack of April 2025 and the ensuing military tension between India and Pakistan have reignited debates over the role of digital media in either escalating or mitigating cross-border hostilities. At a time when online news platforms serve as both information disseminators and opinion shapers, their narrative choices-especially in conflict situations-carry immense political and social consequences.

This paper investigates the construction and dissemination of hyper-nationalistic narratives in Indian online news media following the Pahalgam attack. A striking feature of the coverage was the rapid emergence of emotionally charged headlines, unverified “exclusive” reports, and war-mongering rhetoric that overwhelmed factual and balanced reportage. Instead of fostering informed public discourse, much of the digital media content amplified binaries -India as a righteous victim and Pakistan as an eternal aggressor, thereby reducing the space for peaceful alternatives. This kind of media framing, underpinned by emotionally manipulative language and symbolic imagery, resonates with Goffman’s (1974) and Entman’s (1993) Framing Theory, as well as Gerbner and Gross’s (1976) Cultivation Theory. Together, these help explain how repeated portrayals of the enemy and the normalization of military action cultivate a militarized national consciousness.

The problem is compounded by the increasing proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, often weaponized by both state and non-state actors. Deepfakes, recycled videos from unrelated conflicts, and fake content using credible logos (e.g., CNN) have become key instruments in shaping digital war narratives. Reports from credible fact-checking organisations such as Alt News, as well as international platforms like AFP and France 24, have highlighted how misinformation-whether intentional or otherwise-can dangerously escalate geo-

political tensions. Additionally, foreign media responses varied from neutral to sympathetic portrayals of Pakistan's position, further complicating the transnational information ecology surrounding the conflict.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, there was a marked absence of conflict-resolution narratives in the online media discourse. Few reports, like those published by *The Guardian* and *Financial Express*, attempted to foreground diplomatic, economic, or regional stability concerns. This lack of balanced reporting calls for a deeper investigation into how digital media platforms contribute to either conflict escalation or peace-building.

This paper seeks to critically analyse online media narratives in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, focusing on how hyper-nationalism, disinformation, and digital symbolism contribute to a culture of hostility between India and Pakistan. The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of selected online news reports, employing a theoretical framework informed by Framing Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of *Imagined Communities*. Through this lens, the paper explores how media practices not only reflect but actively shape geopolitical realities in the digital age.

Literature Review

A significant body of literature has examined the role of media in shaping public perception during times of conflict, particularly in the context of India - Pakistan tensions. Scholars such as Thussu (2002) and Rajagopal (2009) have highlighted how Indian media often mirrors nationalist sentiments and plays an active role in constructing enemy images during cross-border conflicts. Goffman's (1974) *Framing Theory* and Entman's (1993) elaboration on media framing serve as foundational frameworks to understand how conflict narratives are selectively constructed using emotionally resonant frames like "revenge," "retaliation," or "patriotism." Similarly, Gerbner and Gross's (1976) *Cultivation Theory* underscores how repeated exposure to hostile representations of Pakistan reinforces the perception of a perpetual threat, contributing to what they call the "Mean World Syndrome." Studies by Chatterjee (2020) and Punathambekar (2013) also reveal how digital platforms intensify nationalistic discourse through algorithmic amplification and sensationalist content. Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of *Imagined Communities* has been recontextualized in recent scholarship to examine

how digital media contributes to forming hyper-nationalist publics by creating symbolic binaries of 'us' versus 'them'. In recent years, research by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) has also focused on the role of disinformation in conflict zones, suggesting that fake content, especially deep fakes and miscontextualized media can inflame tensions and mislead public opinion. However, there remains a noticeable gap in literature analyzing the current surge of hyper-nationalist and emotionally manipulative digital journalism during Operation Sindoor and the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. This study attempts to bridge that gap by closely examining the digital media ecosystem's war narratives, disinformation flows, and the near absence of conflict-resolution reporting in contemporary Indian online journalism.

Study Objectives

1. To examine how online media framed the Pahalgam terrorist attack and Operation Sindoor with reference to hyper-nationalism, militaristic language and emotional spectacle.
2. To analyse the presence and circulation of misinformation and fake content in digital narratives around the conflict, and the role of fact-checking mechanisms in countering them.
3. To compare Indian and international online media narratives of war reporting in terms of framing, tone, and orientation.
4. To evaluate the implications of such online media narratives for journalistic ethics, peace/conflict resolution, and public discourse in South Asia.

Research Questions

RQ1: How did online media frame the Pahalgam terrorist attack and Operation Sindoor, particularly in relation to hyper-nationalism, militaristic language, and emotional spectacle?

RQ2: In what ways did misinformation and fake content circulate within digital narratives surrounding the conflict, and how effectively did fact-checking mechanisms address them?

RQ3: How do Indian and international online media narratives about war reporting differ in their framing, tone, and orientation (war journalism vs. peace journalism)?

RQ4: What are the broader implications of these online media narratives for journalistic ethics, peace/conflict resolution, and public discourse in South Asia?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis methodology to examine the narrative patterns, framing devices, and emotional language used in online media coverage of the India - Pakistan conflict following the Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025. The objective of the analysis is to critically assess how online news platforms construct hyper-nationalist, adversarial, or peace-oriented narratives, and how such portrayals contribute to public perception and geopolitical understanding.

Sample Selection

A purposive sampling method was employed to select online news articles published between May 8 and May 13, 2025, a critical period immediately following the Pahalgam attack. News sources were selected based on relevance, reach, influence, and ideological diversity. These included Indian online news platforms including; *Times of India*, *Zee News*, *Republic TV*, *Financial Express*, *India TV*, *News Minute*, *News Laundry* and foreign media platforms including; *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *TASS*, *Global Times*, *CGTN*, *France 24*.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Communities (1983) to analyze the online media narratives surrounding the Pahalgam attack and the ensuing India-Pakistan conflict. Framing Theory helps explain how media reports deploy emotionally charged language such as "revenge," "act of war," and "fitting reply" to construct a reality that prioritizes conflict over peace, while sidelining alternative perspectives. Cultivation Theory,

particularly the “Mean World Syndrome,” is relevant in understanding how repeated portrayals of Pakistan as a terror state reinforce public perceptions of constant threat and justify aggressive posturing. Anderson’s Imagined Communities provides a lens to interpret how digital platforms contribute to a form of “digital nationalism” by constructing symbolic binaries - India as unified and morally superior, Pakistan as the external, eternal enemy. These narratives are further amplified by the spread of disinformation and fake content, as seen in the misuse of old videos and deepfakes, which were disseminated even by official and mainstream platforms. Collectively, these frameworks help situate the study in a critical media analysis of how online journalism does not merely report conflict but also produces and legitimizes nationalist imaginaries and antagonistic sentiments in the digital public sphere.

Analysis

Narratives of War: From Journalism to Jingoism

The shift in India’s digital media landscape post-Pahalgam attack reveals an alarming drift from journalistic neutrality to nationalist fervour. A content analysis of the selected news reports shows that media coverage during this conflict period has been significantly dominated by war rhetoric, emotionally charged headlines, and unverified claims - often undermining the core principles of balanced and ethical journalism.

The ideal role of media in times of conflict is to inform the public with accuracy, maintain objectivity, and promote peace-oriented discourse. However, in the aftermath of the April 22 Pahalgam attack and India’s retaliatory operation named *Operation Sindoor*, the majority of online media narratives have adopted a combative tone, reinforcing binary oppositions and amplifying nationalist sentiment. This trend raises the pertinent question: is the digital media space serving as a platform for journalism or as an echo chamber of jingoism?

A notable example comes from *The Times of India*’s online edition dated 11.05.2025, which published a report titled: “Any future act of terror will be treated as act of war: India warns Pakistan amid escalating conflict.” The report, while carrying a provocative headline, conspicuously omits the source of this

high-stakes claim. This omission is critical, especially when juxtaposed with the official communications from the Ministry of Defence, which have consistently described India's actions as "controlled," "calibrated," and "responsible." No public record exists of a formal statement equating terrorism with a declaration of war.

This discrepancy illustrates a growing gap between official state discourse and media interpretation. In this gap, sensationalist framing thrives - allowing emotionally charged narratives to take precedence over factual clarity. The lack of transparency in sourcing, particularly in high-impact reports, compromises the credibility of journalism and risks inflaming public opinion during sensitive geopolitical moments.

Furthermore, this hyper-nationalistic tone found in online media reports is often accompanied by glorification of military action, use of martial metaphors, and vilification of the 'enemy', in this case, Pakistan. Words such as "revenge", "strike back", and "zero tolerance" appear repeatedly in headlines and body texts, fostering an atmosphere of urgency and aggression. The consequences of such reporting are not merely rhetorical; they shape public consciousness, influence foreign policy perceptions, and may even escalate diplomatic tensions.



Figure 1. Screenshot from Times of India article "Any future act of terror will be treated as act of war": India warns Pakistan amid escalating conflict" (Times of India, 2024).

Another striking example is the coverage by *Zee News* on 10.05.2025, which ran the headline: "India-Pakistan War: Did Indian Navy Strike Karachi Port? Reports Say." The phrasing itself - particularly the speculative "Reports Say" - reflects a troubling reliance on ambiguous sourcing. The report neither identifies credible sources nor provides verification for the claim that India attacked Karachi Port, one of Pakistan's largest and most strategic industrial corridors. The choice of

this location amplifies the impact of the story, creating fear and tension among Pakistani citizens and stoking cross-border anxiety.

More critically, the phrase “We don’t want an operation, we want a war” - presented in the same report - signals a radical departure from journalistic responsibility. It positions media not as observers or analysts of state policy, but as actors in an aggressive nationalist project. While India’s Ministry of Defence, in several official press conferences, has repeatedly affirmed that *Operation Sindoor* is a restrained and targeted anti-terror operation, this kind of reporting misrepresents the government’s position, thereby fuelling public misperception and diplomatic risk.

Moreover, the same Karachi Port story was echoed on multiple digital news platforms but has since been taken down, suggesting the initial reports were either erroneous or too incendiary to be sustained. This raises an additional concern: the role of disinformation, both from within and outside national borders. It is possible that Pakistan, through its official or unofficial digital channels, may have amplified such narratives to construct an image of India as an aggressor and thus mobilise international sympathy. If true, this would be a classic case of counter-information warfare in a digital age.



Figure 2. Screenshot from Zee News report “India-Pakistan War: INS Vikrant’s powerful launch destroys Karachi Port ...,” 2025).

Such coverage aligns closely with the framing theory proposed by Goffman (1974) and further developed by Entman (1993), which explains how media framing shapes public perception by selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of a perceived reality. By repetitively framing the situation as a retaliatory war, the media not only constructs a particular interpretation of the conflict but also reinforces and amplifies nationalistic emotions among its audience.

This framing effect is not merely rhetorical - it actively shapes how the public understands and reacts to unfolding events. Headlines such as *“Are India and Pakistan hurtling towards a full-scale war?”* (Economic Times, 10.05.2025) and recurring expressions like “revenge,” “strike back,” “no mercy,” “Pak will pay,” “hitting back,” “a fitting reply,” “crushing response,” and “blood for blood” serve to create an atmosphere of imminent large-scale conflict. These emotionally loaded terms normalize a war narrative, making peaceful discourse appear weak, irrelevant, or even unpatriotic.

In one instance, Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Asif was quoted saying, *“There is no alternative to a large-scale war,”* a statement that was widely circulated in Indian digital media without contextual nuance. When media platforms uncritically reproduce such provocative rhetoric—often without verification or critical framing—they contribute to a feedback loop that sustains conflict escalation.



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Economic Times* article “Are India, Pakistan hurtling towards a full-scale war?” (Economic Times, 2025).

A considerable portion of Indian online media coverage following the Pahalgam attack has prominently promoted the narrative that “war is necessary.” This pattern of reporting goes beyond neutral information dissemination and reveals an underlying inclination towards militaristic sensationalism. There is a strong impression that the media is not merely reflecting public sentiment but actively shaping it, often fostering a generalised interest in war with Pakistan. This observation finds theoretical grounding in Gerbner and Gross’s (1976) Cultivation Theory, which posits that long-term exposure to recurring themes in media content can shape audience perceptions of reality. In particular, Gerbner’s concept of Mean World Syndrome explains how consistent depictions of threat and hostility can cultivate a worldview dominated by fear and suspicion. In this context, the continuous portrayal of Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism in Indian media

narratives fosters a public perception that Pakistan is an imminent and intensifying threat. This sustained emphasis normalises the expectation of conflict and positions military retaliation as both inevitable and justified, thereby reducing the discursive space for peacebuilding or diplomatic alternatives.

Digital Nationalism and the Alienation of the 'Other'

The analysis of online media coverage following the Pahalgam attack and the ensuing India -Pakistan tensions reveals a marked intensification of hyper-nationalist narratives and emotions. This event, rather than being reported with balance and objectivity, appears to have been instrumentalised by sections of the digital media to amplify sentiments of hostility and national superiority. In this context, online media reports are not merely disseminating news; they are actively engaged in constructing a form of digital nationalism through selective language use, emotionally charged visuals, and narrative framing that starkly delineates the 'self' and the 'other'.

One of the most striking patterns observed is the normalisation of war discourse through the consistent alienation of Pakistan in media portrayals. This alienation both visual and textual - strengthens a longstanding binary: *India = righteous and unified* versus *Pakistan = hostile and external enemy*. Such binaries are not incidental but systematically constructed and reinforced in coverage that increasingly mirrors ideological narratives rather than journalistic ethics. This aligns with Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of *Imagined Communities*, where nationalism is seen as a socially constructed idea, often shaped through shared media narratives. Anderson's thesis provides a compelling lens to interpret the current media environment, where the nation is being imagined and re-imagined in digital spaces, particularly through oppositional narratives constructed in the context of geopolitical hostility.

A specific instance that exemplifies this trend is the language used in a news article published by Republic TV Online on 11.05.2025, titled "*Three reasons why Pakistan begged for ceasefire agreement with India.*" The use of the word "*begged*" here is not merely descriptive-it is performative. It casts Pakistan in a submissive role, reinforcing the perception of India as dominant and morally superior. Such language does more than report facts; it deepens the ideological binary and further solidifies the image of Pakistan as the eternal adversary.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Republic World* article “Three Reasons Why Pakistan Begged For Ceasefire Agreement With India” (Republic World, 2025).

In the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, Indian online media spaces have seen a surge in the use of symbolic imagery and emotionally charged narratives that reinforce a hyper-nationalist sentiment. The repeated appearance of national flags, military uniforms, funerals of martyrs, and patriotic vocabulary plays a crucial role in visually and textually stitching together a narrative of national unity, sacrifice, and collective identity.

These visual signifiers serve not merely as representations of events but as ideological tools that communicate and reinforce the notion of a monolithic India - one that is united, vigilant, and constantly under threat. In a country marked by deep linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity, such representations are powerful mechanisms to temporarily flatten internal differences and project a unified front. The image of the soldier becomes not just a national protector but a symbol of moral authority and emotional resonance, allowing audiences to emotionally invest in the narrative of the nation.

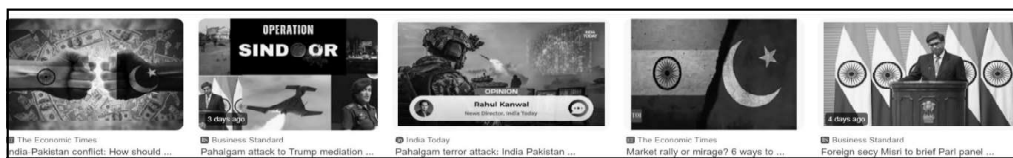


Figure 5. Collage of symbolic imagery (flags, fighter jets, soldiers) used by Indian digital media after the Pahalgam attack. Sources: *The Economic Times* (2025), *Business Standard* (2025), *India Today* (2025).

Foreign Media Narratives and Strategic Framing

A critical look at the coverage of the India - Pakistan conflict by foreign online media in the wake of the Pahalgam attack reveals strategic framing that reflects not only geopolitical alignments but also subtle narrative positioning. Notably, the Global Times, a prominent Chinese government-affiliated outlet, published a report on 08.05.2025 titled *"Pakistani PM voices to avenge 'our innocent martyrs'; India FM warns any attacks will be met with 'firm response': Media."* The title itself juxtaposes grief and threat, using terms such as *"martyrs," "avenge,"* and *"firm response,"* which evoke an emotionally charged and conflict-oriented discourse.

What stands out in this foreign reportage is the deliberate dual framing of both nations as retaliatory actors. The narrative does not favour one country over the other in overt terms but constructs a mirrored portrayal of aggression and victimhood. Pakistan is seen to mourn and vow retribution, while India is projected as issuing stern warnings. This symmetry subtly feeds into a broader international perception of India and Pakistan as perpetually antagonistic neighbours, incapable of de-escalation, and locked in a cycle of provocation and counter-provocation.

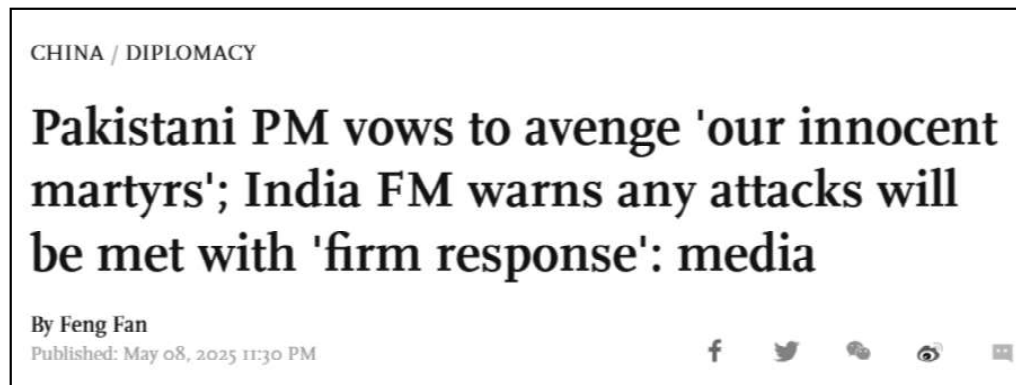


Figure 6. Screenshot from *Global Times* article *"Pakistani PM vows to avenge 'our innocent martyrs'; India FM warns any attacks will be met with 'firm response': media"* (*Global Times*, 2025).

In a similar pattern, other major Chinese media platforms Xinhua and CGTN have predominantly relied on Pakistani media sources for their reportage on the India-Pakistan conflict post-Pahalgam. This reliance subtly introduces a narrative alignment that appears to lean toward Pakistani positions and perspectives.

For instance, the CGTN Online report dated 09.05.2025, titled *“India - Pakistan Tensions: Pakistan Responds to Escalating Tensions with India,”* focuses extensively on Pakistan’s diplomatic and strategic responses while giving minimal attention to Indian official statements or civilian perspectives. The report foregrounds Pakistan’s articulation of being under threat and its emphasis on seeking international support without critically examining the veracity or implications of such claims.



Figure 7. Screenshot from *CGTN* article “Pakistan responds to escalating tensions with India,” highlighting Pakistan’s perspective in reaction to India’s strikes. (CGTN, May 9, 2025)

Similarly, Russian state news agency TASS actively engaged with the India - Pakistan conflict narrative in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, publishing four prominent headlines that covered the escalation. Particularly noteworthy is the TASS Online report dated 10.05.2025, which declared that *“India made a series of strikes against Pakistan’s air force bases - Geo TV.”*

The headline is direct, assertive, and unambiguous, presenting a serious claim without qualifying language such as “reportedly” or “allegedly.” The source of the information - Pakistan-based Geo TV is mentioned, yet the lack of editorial distancing from the claim suggests a level of narrative endorsement unusual in conventional journalistic standards.



Figure 8. Screenshot from TASS article “India made series of strikes against Pakistan’s air force bases - Geo TV,” highlighting missile strike claims (TASS, May 10, 2025).

The presence of a discernible pro-Pakistan framing is evident in the *Washington Post Online* report dated 10.05.2025, titled “*Pakistan strikes sites inside India, bringing nuclear rivalries closer to war.*” The headline itself foregrounds Pakistan’s military action as the narrative entry point, effectively positioning Pakistan as an assertive actor rather than an aggressor. There is no mention of the preceding Pahalgam attack or India’s stated justification for military operations, thus omitting essential context that would enable a more balanced reading of the escalation. The framing, by focusing on Pakistan’s offensive capabilities and invoking the spectre of nuclear conflict, subtly constructs a narrative in which Pakistan appears reactive and India is framed as pushing the region toward nuclear brinkmanship.



Figure 9. Screenshot from *NZ Herald* article “Pakistan Strikes Sites Inside India, Bringing Nuclear Rivals Nearer to War” (NZ Herald / Washington Post, 2025).

In contrast to several sensational or national-interest-driven narratives observed in other media outlets, *The Guardian* has taken a markedly factual and unbiased approach in its coverage of the India-Pakistan conflict. The report published on 10.05.2025, titled “*India -Pakistan military conflict: what we know so far*”, presents a balanced synthesis of verified information, steering clear of emotive language or speculative framing. Rather than amplifying nationalistic sentiment or relying on unnamed sources, *The Guardian* adheres to journalistic rigour by focusing on confirmed developments, official statements from both sides, and verified data points. The structure of the report prioritises clarity and neutrality, using language that avoids either demonising or glorifying either party in the conflict.



Figure 10. Screenshot from *The Guardian* article “India-Pakistan military conflict: what we know so far” (The Guardian, May 10, 2025).

The *Live Mint Online* report titled “*How US, UK, Russia and Chinese media covered India -Pakistan conflict: ‘Nuclear rivalries nearer to war’*,” published on 10.05.2025, offers a meta-narrative lens on how global media houses are framing the India - Pakistan conflict in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. By compiling and analysing international headlines from the US, UK, Russia, and China, the report underscores a common thematic thread - the increasing spectre of nuclear confrontation. The phrase “*nuclear rivalries nearer to war*” encapsulates the alarmist tone prevalent in several foreign media narratives, particularly those from Western and Russian outlets. However, the *Live Mint* article maintains a degree of analytical distance, not endorsing these portrayals but critically presenting how India’s image and strategic actions are being shaped in the global media ecosystem.



Figure 11. Screenshot from *LiveMint* article “How US, UK, Russia and Chinese media covered India-Pakistan conflict: ‘Nuclear rivals nearer to war’” (LiveMint, May 10, 2025).

Fake Content in the Fog of War: Manufacturing Conflict in the Digital Sphere

In the theatre of war, truth is often the first casualty. This adage finds contemporary resonance in the context of the India–Pakistan conflict following the Pahalgam attack, where a flood of fake content, rather than merely “fake news”, has distorted public perception and amplified tensions. As the lines between news and misinformation blur in the hyper-digital era, misleading images, recycled videos, and manipulated audio clips have circulated widely across platforms, often without verification. Notably, during the initial phase of India’s Operation Sindoor, a video purportedly featuring a Pakistan Army general admitting the loss of two aircraft gained traction across international media. As revealed by a France 24 Online report dated 13.05.2025, titled *No truce in India–Pakistan disinformation war*, AFP fact-checkers later determined that this video was fabricated by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

This was not an isolated case. A recycled video from the 2023 Israeli airstrike on Gaza was repurposed by Pakistani military handles and presented as fresh footage from the India-Pakistan front. Similarly, images and clips from the Ukraine war were reframed and falsely attributed to the ongoing subcontinental conflict, further muddying the media waters. The strategic deployment of fake content—not necessarily from newsrooms, but often by state actors or ideologically moti-

vated agents-demonstrates the weaponisation of digital platforms in modern conflict.

The terminology also matters: to refer to these manipulated items as “fake news” legitimises them as journalism gone wrong. Instead, recognising them as fake content- fabricated, misleading, or contextually misused media helps preserve the distinction between ethical journalism and strategic disinformation. The deliberate spread of such content serves not just to mislead but also to incite hatred, fuel polarisation, and escalate hostilities. The intentional circulation of falsehoods, particularly those designed to mimic authenticity, highlights the need for stronger digital literacy, robust fact-checking mechanisms, and a reimagining of journalistic ethics in times of conflict.



Figure 12. Screenshot from *France24* article “No Truce in India-Pakistan Disinformation War” (France24, May 13, 2025).

As digital platforms become primary battlegrounds in geopolitical conflicts, the deliberate spread of fake content - misleading videos, doctored images, and out-of-context narratives - has emerged as a potent weapon of psychological warfare. The *News Minute*’s report titled *Narratives at War: How Fake News Escalates India-Pakistan Tensions* (10.05.2025) offers a critical lens into this phenomenon, featuring an interview with Mohammed Zubair, founder of Alt News, one of India’s most respected fact-checking organisations. In the interview and accompanying video, Zubair underscores how fabricated media content, especially during times of national trauma can exacerbate hostilities, provoke irrational public sentiment, and derail diplomatic efforts.



Figure 13. Screenshot from *The News Minute* video “Narratives at War: How Fake News Escalates India-Pakistan Tensions | LME Special Ft Zubair” (P. Prasanna, May 10, 2025).

The strategic use of fabricated digital content during geopolitical conflicts has taken a dangerous turn with the rise of deepfakes and manipulated videos. The *News Laundry Online* report titled *Fake Pilots, Fake Missiles, Fake News: How Pak Weaponised Disinformation Against India* (12.05.2025) critically examines how Pakistan has allegedly used deepfakes and outdated video footage to wage a disinformation war against India in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack and during Operation Sindoor. The report reveals how misleading content, including doctored visuals of Indian military setbacks, fake missile strikes, and manipulated speeches, were strategically disseminated through social media channels and even echoed in mainstream online portals.



Figure 14. Screenshot from *NewsLaundry* article “Fake Pilots, Fake Missiles, Fake News: How Pak Weaponised Disinformation against India” (Goyal, 2025).

The tangled nature of fake content circulation during the India-Pakistan conflict post-Pahalgam attack becomes even more complex when state institutions themselves are entangled in the misinformation loop. A revealing example of this paradox is presented in the *India TV News Online* report published on 12.05.2025, titled *Pakistan continues to spread fake news: PIB Fact Check debunks misinformation on India-Pakistan conflict*.

The article documents how India's official fact-checking unit, PIB Fact Check, flagged several instances of disinformation, including fabricated content misusing the CNN logo, allegedly spread by Pakistan to mislead global audiences about Indian military actions.



Figure 15. Screenshot from *India TV News* article "Pakistan continues to spread fake news: PIB Fact Check debunks misinformation on India-Pakistan conflict" (India TV News, May 12, 2025).

Where Are the Conflict Resolution Narratives?

An important absence in the online media coverage following the Pahalgam attack is the notable lack of narratives that promote conflict resolution or de-escalation. Among the thirty news reports analysed, very few attempted to contextualise the crisis in terms of peace-building, negotiation, or diplomatic dialogue. This void is significant, considering the potential geopolitical, humanitarian, and economic consequences of a full-scale war between nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan.

The framing adopted by most online platforms focused on retaliation, revenge, military pride, and national assertion, leaving little space for balanced, peace-oriented discourse. This imbalance aligns with Galtung's theory of *war journalism*, where reporting tends to dramatise conflict, rely heavily on elite sources, and marginalise peace perspectives.



Figure 16. Screenshot from *The Financial Express* article “Friends not for war” (Singh, 2025).

While the overwhelming majority of online media narratives following the Pahalgam attack focused on retaliation, escalation, and hyper-nationalism, a small subset of reports attempted to frame the conflict in terms of de-escalation and diplomatic restraint. These rare instances are crucial, as they represent the alternative discourses of peace and conflict resolution often marginalized in war-time reportage.

One such instance is the report published by *The Guardian* on 12.05.2025, titled *From Missiles to Troops: How India and Pakistan Pulled Back from the Brink*. The article provides a retrospective narrative of how both nations despite the intense posturing avoided full-scale war through a series of strategic recalibrations and backchannel diplomacy. However, the report places significant emphasis on the role of the United States in de-escalating tensions, portraying Washington as a behind-the-scenes mediator that facilitated restraint on both sides.



Figure 17. Screenshot from *The Guardian* article “From missiles to ceasefire: how India and Pakistan pulled back from the brink” (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025)

The narrative landscape of online media reporting on the India-Pakistan conflict demands a greater sense of journalistic responsibility, particularly in the era of hyper-networked digital communication. Within this unique media ecosystem characterised by the viral spread of hyperbolic content, emotionally charged memes, and misinformation on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and WhatsApp, the risk of inflaming tensions is significantly amplified. What emerges is a climate of digital nationalism, wherein media discourse often aligns with aggressive national sentiments rather than promoting reflection or reconciliation.

This phenomenon is theoretically anchored in Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) “Propaganda Model”, as articulated in *Manufacturing Consent*, which argues that media institutions often function as ideological apparatuses serving the interests of state power and elite consensus. In the context of the India-Pakistan conflict, this alignment becomes evident in the overwhelming reproduction of state narratives, with limited space for critical dissent or alternative diplomatic perspectives. Instead of functioning merely as a conduit for government messaging, the media has an ethical obligation to interrogate power, challenge dominant ideologies, and provide space for peace-oriented discourse.

As articulated by the American Press Institute, journalism’s core democratic function is to act as a watchdog over power, holding decision-makers accountable and ensuring that the public is informed with accuracy and fairness not manipulated through fear or nationalist fervour. Upholding these ideals in conflict reporting is crucial, not only for maintaining democratic values but also for preventing the legitimisation of violence through normalised digital war narratives.

Discussion

The post-Pahalgam digital media landscape underscores a shift in the construction of conflict narratives in India. Rather than serving as a space for balanced reporting, much of the mainstream online media leaned into hyper-nationalistic rhetoric, foregrounding terms like *“revenge,” “strike back,”* and *“blood for blood.”* This tendency to frame India as the righteous self and Pakistan as the perpetual enemy demonstrates the centrality of Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) in understanding how events are selectively represented to reinforce binary oppositions.

The prevalence of such frames also aligns with Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory, wherein repeated exposure to militaristic imagery and emotionally charged language cultivates a worldview in which conflict is naturalized and war appears inevitable. By consistently foregrounding images of sacrifice, retaliation, and nationalism, Indian digital platforms cultivated a cultural environment where militarism seemed not only acceptable but necessary.

Equally significant is the way these digital narratives reinforced what Benedict Anderson (1983) terms the *“imagined community.”* Through hashtags, viral videos, memes, and coordinated online campaigns, the Indian nation was symbolically reassembled in the digital sphere as a unified community under threat. This participatory nationalism allowed citizens to feel part of a collective struggle, even while deepening hostility toward the *“enemy other.”*

The analysis also revealed a disturbing degree of misinformation and fake content circulating during this crisis. Repurposed videos, unverified claims, and manipulated visuals, often amplified by both state and non-state actors, illustrate how digital war zones weaponize disinformation. While fact-checking initiatives by Alt News, PIB, and AFP attempted to correct distortions, their impact was marginal compared to the scale of circulation. This directly responds to RQ2, highlighting how the ecosystem of fake content undermines informed public discourse.

A comparative look at international media (e.g., The Guardian, Washington Post, Al Jazeera) shows a greater tendency toward conflict-sensitive framing, warning of nuclear risks and advocating restraint. In contrast, Indian media overwhelmingly reproduced war journalism frames, with only rare exceptions such as *The*

Financial Express. This difference addresses RQ3, emphasizing how the crisis of peace journalism in India stands out against more balanced international coverage.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how digital media constructed narratives around the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, with particular attention to framing, misinformation, participatory nationalism, and ethical implications. The findings demonstrate that:

1. Framing practices in Indian digital media overwhelmingly emphasized hyper-nationalist and militaristic narratives, presenting the conflict in binary terms (RQ1).
2. Misinformation and fake content played a central role in shaping perceptions, weaponized to fuel outrage and reinforce nationalist sentiment (RQ2).
3. Comparative analysis revealed that international media displayed more conflict-sensitive and peace-oriented framings, in contrast to the predominantly aggressive tone of Indian outlets (RQ3).
4. The overall trend reflects a crisis of peace journalism, raising concerns about ethics, accountability, and the narrowing of discursive space for diplomacy and de-escalation (RQ4).

In conclusion, the convergence of framing, cultivation, and imagined community logics in Indian digital media has reinforced divisive nationalism while marginalizing peace-oriented perspectives. This poses serious risks for public discourse in South Asia, where media has the potential either to escalate hostilities or to foster dialogue. As digital platforms become the dominant arena of political communication, there is an urgent need to reorient journalism toward accountability, conflict sensitivity, and peacebuilding. Strengthening editorial standards, integrating fact-checking more systematically, and drawing on peace journalism frameworks (Galtung, 2002) are crucial steps. These measures can help ensure that digital media does not simply become a theatre of war, but a forum for negotiation, empathy, and coexistence.

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