Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

Yasmin ALDAMEN[*]
Dilana Thasleem ABDUL JALEEL[**]

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented global crisis, affecting every aspect of life. In the difficult times, the role of the media has become even more crucial. However, it has been noted that some Indian media has spread baseless conspiracy theories, exploiting COVID-19 for certain agendas. The role of Indian media during the COVID-19 pandemic has been questioned due to the biased dissemination of information. This study aims to observe how national news channels, through their prime-time debates, propagated the narrative of a Muslim conspiracy by spreading false information during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. It also seeks to understand the role of media narratives and representations in setting the Hindu nationalist agenda and portraying Muslims as anti-national" or the other of the nation. The study sample includes the content of prime-time news programs from six well-known TV news channels in India: Times Now, Republic TV, India TV, Zee News, CNN News 18, and India Today. News media organizations in India tend to favor majoritarian sentiments and ideas while marginalizing and condemning minorities and their beliefs, particularly in relation to religion and religiosity. The overt role of a number of news channels in amplifying the conspiracy against Muslims, particularly in framing them as the 'other' or the 'anti-national', aligns with the Hindu nationalist agenda. Depending on agenda setting and framing certain issues in a way that demonizes Muslims, the media could perpetuate stereotypes and fuel resentment towards those groups, which are already marginalized or misunderstood.

Keywords: National Media, Conspiracy Theory, Media Agenda-Setting, Anti-National, Representation of Muslims, Propaganda

Komplo Propagandası mı Yoksa Medya Gündem Belirleme mi? COVID-19 Sırasında Hindistan Medyasında Müslümanların Anti-Milli Olarak Temsili

Öz

COVID-19 salgını, hayatın her alanını etkileyen, benzeri görülmemiş bir küresel krize yol açmıştır. Böyle zor zamanlarda medyanın rolü daha da önem kazanmaktadır. Nitekim, bazı Hint medya kanallarının COVID-19'u belirli gündemlere hizmet edecek şekilde kullanarak temelsiz komplo teorileri yaydığı tespit edilmiştir. Salgın sürecinde Hindistan'daki medya organlarının, bilgileri taraflı bir biçimde aktarması nedeniyle rolleri sorgulanmıştır. Bu çalışma, Hindistan'da COVID-19 salgınının ilk dönemlerinde, ulusal haber kanallarının ana haber tartışmalarında yanlış bilgi yayarak Müslümanları hedef alan bir komplo teorisini nasıl dolaşıma soktuklarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, Hindu

---

[*] Assistant Professor, The University of Jordan, e-mail: my_aldamen@ju.edu.jo, orcid.org/0000-0002-0808-5235, Amman, Jordan

[**] Research Assistant, Ibn Haldun University, e-mail: dilana.jaleel@ihu.edu.tr, orcid.org/0009-0009-6055-5802, İstanbul, Türkiye

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

milliyetçi gündeminin şekillendirilmesinde ve Müslümanların "ulus karşıtı" ya da ulusun ötekisi olarak sunulmasında medya anlatılarının ve temsillerinin rolünü anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışma örlemi, Hindistan'daki altı önde gelen televizyon haber kanalının ana haber programlarının içeriğini kapsamaktadır: Times Now, Republic TV, India TV, Zee News, CNN News 18 ve India Today. Genel olarak, Hindistan'daki haber medyası, özellikle din ve dindarlık söz konusu olduğunda, azınlıkları ve onların inançlarını marjinalleştirip kınarken, çoğunluğun duygu ve düşüncelerini destekleme eğilimindedir. Birçok haber kanalının, Müslümanlara yönelik komplo söylemlerini körüklemede açık bir rol oynadığı görülmektedir. Özellikle Müslümanları "öteki" ya da "anti-milli" olarak çerçevelemeleri, Hindu milliyetçi gündemle örtüşmektedir. Medya, gündem belirleme gücü ve Müslümanları şeytanlaştıran çerçevelendirme stratejileriyle, bu gruplara yönelik stereotipleri pekiştirmekte; zaten marjinalleştirilmiş ya da yanlış anlaşılmış olan bu topluluklara karşı kin ve öfkeyi körükleyebilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusal Medya, Komplo Teorisi, Medya Gündemi Belirleme, Anti-Milli, Müslümanların Temsili, Propaganda

Introduction

After the WHO declared COVID-19 a health emergency on January 30, 2020, the Indian government issued and implemented several restrictions and actions. With barely four hours' warning, the government declared a total nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020. A massive exodus occurred, notably in the country's largest cities, because of the unexpected lockdown that resulted in the closure of all means of transportation, without taking into consideration the fact that millions of people resided or could be gathered in other cities and provinces for different purposes. Alam & Zaini (2021) stated that the government's decision to announce the lockdown initially assisted in slowing the spread of the coronavirus, but over time, the transmission rate significantly increased.

According to Khan (2022), the migrant laborers in India suffered the most because of this unplanned lockdown. They walked over long distances without adequate food or drink, and many of them perished trying to reach their communities. Still, within a week, most India's national news channels and their prime-time debates abruptly shifted their focus from the issue facing migrant workers to accusing Tablighi Jamaat. This multinational Muslim group is active in India, spreading COVID-19 on purpose across the nation. The Tabligh's conference was held in the city of New Delhi, particularly in Nizamuddin, from March 8 to 15, before the government enacted any action or regulation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ushama (2021) explained that some of the attendees were infected, and they eagerly complied when the authorities summoned them to undergo medical testing. People who were given a positive diagnosis were isolated after adhering to the correct procedures and protocols.

In the study of Sharma & Anand (2020), it was explained that the present Indian government, however, stated that the Tabligh Conference, a religious congregation organized between March 1 and 21 by the worldwide religious organization in Delhi, Tablighi Jamaat, brought over 5,000 participants from diverse nations to India's capital and was one of the main coronavirus clusters. This was even when it disregarded numerous other religious meetings conducted after the imposition of the lockdown. Kumar (2020) noted in his news column that after returning from Germany and Italy on March 7, the Indian political leader, a 70-year-old Punjabi Sikh preacher named Baldev Singh, violated self-quarantine and participated in an event

on March 11–12, which was attended by thousands of supporters. The event was later linked to over 30,000 COVID-19-positive cases, and Singh subsequently passed away from COVID-19-related causes. According to Faizan (2020) although transportation was offered to 1,800 delayed travelers at Haridwar, a Hindu pilgrimage place, it was not given to those at the Tabligh conference in Delhi. Since the far-right government took power, anti-religious minority sentiments and atrocities in the country have grown blatant.

According to Basu (2021) the RSS, which was founded in 1925, is the primary instrument in Indian politics for a nondemocratic, exclusivist vision of nation-building, with the construction of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) as a key component. Bose (2018; 2019) states that Hindutva ideology is based on three core values: intrinsic Hindu unity; the belief that India is a Hindu land, not a melting pot of different cultural influences; and the view that Muslims in India are enemies of Hinduism. M. S. Golwalkar (the second sarsangchalak, or top leader, of the RSS) and V. D. Savarkar (a member and president of the Hindu Mahasabha) founded the ideologies and values of Hindu nationalism. Muslims constitute the largest religious minority population in India, and their monolithic religious ideology is considered contradictory to Hindu religious philosophy. After the partition of India and Pakistan, the subcontinent experienced Islamophobia due to historical conflicts and ideological divides.

As noted by Basu (2021) the victory of the Hindu nationalist BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) elections in India accelerated hate crimes against religious minorities in the country. Hindutva supporters employed organized methods to oppress the Muslim minority, while the Muslim community's struggle for empowerment further fueled tensions. Hussain et al., (2019) highlight several examples of hate crimes against Muslims that occurred after the BJP came to power, including the murder of Muhammad Akhlaq in Badri in 2015, the killings of Anwar Hussain and Hafizul Sheikh in Bengal, the Junaid Khan incident, and the murder of Muhammad Afrazul in Rajasthan in 2017.

While the BJP was strategically flexible on some key topics, such as support for a unitary state, economic nationalism, and hostility to accommodating lower caste ambitions, it has never compromised on its three fundamental values, including the perpetual othering of Muslims. As noted by Basu (2021) the fundamental understanding of Hindu nationalism, both Muslims and Christians are excluded from the Indian nation, as in Hinduism, their religious and cultural allegiance lies elsewhere.

In addition, as observed by Hussain et al., (2019), Islamophobia is accelerated by external factors such as international competition between various powers. The hatred against Muslims increased after the September 11, 2001, attacks, creating a global misconception that Muslims are terrorists. Similarly, Muslims in India face the problem of being labelled aggressive terrorists, and all terrorist acts are linked to them.

Singh (2024) stated that the Washington-based research organization, the India Hate Lab, has reported a significant 62% increase in anti-Muslim hate speech in India during the second half of 2023 compared to the first six months of the year. According to their documentation, a total of 668 incidents targeting Muslims occurred throughout the year, with approximately 75% (498 incidents) taking place in states governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The highest numbers of incidents were reported in

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Furthermore, between October 7—coinciding with the outbreak of the Israeli attack against Gaza—and December 31, there were 41 instances of hate speech against Indian Muslims that explicitly referenced the war. The Indian government, however, has denied allegations of minority abuse, asserting that its policies are designed to benefit all citizens equally.

Depending on previous studies this study tries to fill the knowledge gap observing how the national news channels, through their prime-time discussions, claimed the conspiracy of Muslims by spreading false narratives during the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. It aims to observe how national news channels, through their prime-time debates, propagated the narrative of a Muslim conspiracy by spreading false information during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. It also seeks to understand the role of media narratives and representations in setting the Hindu nationalist agenda and portraying Muslims as anti-national" or the other of the nation. The study sample includes the content of prime-time news programs from six well-known TV news channels in India: Times Now, Republic TV, India TV, Zee News, CNN News 18, and India Today. Keywords selected for content analysis include Tablighi Community, Islamophobia, Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, Pandemic, and Discrimination. News media organizations in India tend to favor majoritarian sentiments and ideas while marginalizing and condemning minorities and their beliefs, particularly in relation to religion and religiosity.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of research by focusing specifically on prime-time television news discussions during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Unlike previous studies that broadly analyse media bias or Islamophobia in general terms, this research examines the linguistic and discursive strategies employed by news anchors and TV channels in framing Muslims as "anti-national" and "the other" of the nation. By analysing prime-time debates across six prominent national news channels, the study highlights how the portrayal of Muslims, particularly the Tablighi Jamaat community, was constructed through the deliberate use of inflammatory language, selective framing, and agenda-driven narratives. This focus on the temporal and discursive dynamics of prime-time debates during a critical period fills a significant gap in understanding how narratives framed by the mainstream media intersect with Hindu nationalist ideologies to perpetuate the marginalization and vilification of Muslims in contemporary India.

1. Otherization of Muslim and the making of the Hindu Nation

According to the studies of scholars Chakravarty & Gooptu (2000) and Kumar (2013), the first tangible manifestation of Hindutva's uncompromising majority vision came from Vinayak Damodar Savakar (1883–1966) and other influential Hindu figures such as MS Golwalkar, who have emerged as the fathers of modern Hindu nationalism. It all started with a religious zealot. They declared, India was considered a sacred land for Hindus, exclusive to their heritage and not associated with Muslims or Christians, who were seen as outsiders and portrayed Muslims as the other. Hindus are the only legitimate members of the Hindu nation. The Hindutva ideologues' conception of a Hindu Nation or Hindu Rashtra has ideological roots that date back to the colonial era of India. The divide-and-rule strategy adopted by Britain to create colonial control sowed sectarian seeds in the Indian subcontinent, which were followed and fanned by the 1947 partition

of India and Pakistan and the conflict between both nations over the province of Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority province of India.

As observed by Chakravarty & Gooptu (2000) and Kumar (2013) this sectarianism seems to be reflected in the growing backlash of Hindus in the name of nationalism against Islam and Muslims since the 1990s. This led to the rapid development of Hindutva politics, which spread throughout India. Hindutva thus became the dominant ideology and has been extensively used to define the boundaries of cultural spheres and the dos and don'ts of public space. It also demonstrates a strong commitment to respecting the cultural and geographical boundaries of what Hindutva ideologues call Hindu Rashtra by either ousting or subtly assimilating non-Hindus, especially Muslims. Hindutva mobilizes people's imaginations about the need to identify Hindus and to demarcate not only other peoples, especially Muslims but also Christians and often confusingly Sikhs, aiming to clarify who belongs to India.

Chakravarty & Gooptu (2000) explain that the imagination of the concept of nation has traditionally been shaped by political conflicts between diverse socioeconomic groups. In the result, the construction of the concept of the nation itself is a field of conflict in which different players compete to define it and carve out a place for themselves. As a result, it is vital to understand exclusions when considering how a nation is being constructed discursively. The idea of nations according to Anderson (2006) is as imagined communities. He argued that the origins and spread of nationalism is a product of modern technologies for dissemination of ideas, such as the press, which created shared languages and homogeneous fields of exchange below Latin and above spoken vernaculars. Thus, how these processes allowed people to imagine the nation, fostering a sense of deep, horizontal comradeship.

The idea of nations according to Anderson (2006) is as "imagined communities,". He argued that the origins and spread of nationalism is a product of modern technologies for dissemination of ideas, such as the press, which created shared languages and homogeneous fields of exchange below Latin and above spoken vernaculars. Thus, how these processes allowed people to imagine the nation, fostering a sense of deep, horizontal comradeship.

The process of creating a national narrative encapsulates ongoing ideological conflicts within communities as they attempt to establish unique dominant identities centered on certain meanings in the face of variety and diversity at specific points in history. According to Hallam & Street (2000) national identity, as it is described and portrayed in nationalist discourses, is a battlefield where competing meanings and identities must be resolved, marginalized, appropriated, or displaced in order to build and present a self-aware and authoritative national identity.

Hindu Rashtra discourse is being spread in the context of competing concepts of nationhood and is being exploited to achieve political goals. India's current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, on behalf of Hindutva, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, their affiliates, and their political branches, pursues an ideology that places Hinduness at the heart of the country's identity and expressly interprets Muslims as its opponents. Kumar (2013) highlights in his writing that the Muslim is seen as the 'other' and is the target of the Hindu Rashtra and its apparent implication, the Hindu state. On the other hand, as noted by Balabantaray (2022) Muslims are

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

commonly seen as the biggest danger to this pinnacle of nationalist pride. As a result, India's reputation as the motherland of the Muslim minority has been distorted.

2. The Role of the Indian Media in Demonizing and Vilifying the Muslim Community

Hussain et al., (2019) claim that the portrayal of Muslims as militants and criminals in literature, including newspaper editorials, magazines, films, plays, academic studies, and novels, among other works, has long existed in Indian culture and has contributed to hate crimes against Muslims. Since the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Muslim characters have often been featured in derogatory parts in Indian films, notably in Bollywood films, whether as thieves, minor crooks, ambition-driven politicians, corrupt police officers, or as Pakistani aggressors against heroic Indian armed forces. Scholars Chadha & Kavoori (2008) observe in their studies that several films presented Muslims as aggressive, nasty people motivated by a deep hatred of India and a fervent desire to destroy it. After the World Trade Center incident, Bollywood, like Hollywood, began presenting Indian Muslims with Kashmiri identities as terrorists and anti-nationals. Bhat (2019) is also of the view that in general, many films have been made on this subject to portray Muslims as harsh, portraying them as extremists, terrorists, and harmful people not just for India but also for the whole world.

According to the Media Ownership Monitor initiated by Reporters Without Borders (2019), with its widespread illiteracy and multilingual population, India presents a situation where visual media, such as film and television, have a far higher potential than written text for visualizing and describing the country and creating according to Hallam & Street (2000) a sense of pan-Indian identity.

This demonization and vilification of the Muslim community, however, is not confined to the entertainment media. Khan (2022) significantly contributes to this argument stating that the major TV channels and newspapers of the country which have previously advocated anti-Muslim narratives, portrayed Muslims as traitors who battled against their country during the COVID-19 outbreak by labeling them suicide bombers and bio-terrorists. Especially the national TV news channels of the country are the primary carriers of the idea of declaring India a Hindu Nation by generating religious conflict disguised as political disagreements and framing minority religious identity as the other or the enemy of the nation, day in and day out, through their prime-time debates.

According to Aldamen (2023a, 2023c), the phenomenon of otherization is evident in instances where the media is utilized to attribute blame to certain groups for the deterioration of societal norms, as well as the acceptance or rejection of divergent ideologies, and assigning responsibility to external factors for the societal setbacks. In his analysis Balabantaray (2022) discusses that coronavirus as a pandemic was exploited as a pretext in the construction of a false narrative against Muslims, which, according to Hussain et al., (2019), has stimulated religious hatred and consequent discrimination, as well as hate crimes against minority communities in numerous parts of India. The spread of the coronavirus has not only produced a health disaster for the country but has also pushed India to the brink of a kind of divisiveness. When contagious illnesses develop, xenophobic tendencies are much more pronounced.

Aldamen, (2023f); Aldamen & Abdul Jaleel, (2024b) stated that the media's involvement in spreading false information, spreading rumors, creating unfavorable attitudes, and other factors are crucial in influencing prejudice and stigma during pandemics. As noted by (Aldamen, 2017, 2023c, 2023d, 2024, 2025) the media have a great responsibility to highlight society's most important issues. Media outlets in India are politically motivated, with many aligning with the Hindu nationalist agenda. However, Jena et al., (2021) stated that most of the popular news media outlets in India are politically motivated and biased, which prevents them from being objective. A new media regime that creates a split public was brought about by India's economic liberalization in the 1980s. It created a political vacuum, of which Hindu nationalists took advantage. Hindu nationalists exploited the structural divide and mutual misunderstandings between English-speaking elites and those of regional languages. In this context Asmer Beg (2008) asserts that the marginalized groups of India like Muslims and Dalits are underrepresented in newsrooms and usually get negative or no attention.

According to Tazamal (2022), there are 200 million Muslims in India. Muslims have often been victimized by the mainstream national media, which broadcasts in both Hindi and English twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The issues in their community are oversimplified, with a focus on their religious convictions rather than their history or economic concerns. For the atrocities perpetrated by a few, the whole community is implicitly responsible. Muslims accused of terrorism and have been labeled terrorists by the Indian media. Therefore, a non-Muslim engaged in such operations might be anything other than a terrorist.

Asmer Beg (2008) argues that the media seldom contests the veracity of government reporting on terrorist occurrences. Every time terrorism is covered on television or in the media, a terrorist with a stereotypically Muslim beard and look is shown. Islam has been demonized as an inherently intolerant faith that breeds extremism. Shands (2008) states that every Muslim living in India is portrayed in this scenario as Pakistan's fifth column, and his faith is the root of global terrorism. He must make an additional effort to demonstrate his patriotism. Media criticism of Muslim radicals might easily be interpreted as criticism of all Muslims. It becomes difficult to discern between the two sorts of Muslims that the media has portrayed in the public's thoughts about the nation. For non-Muslims, it seems that a radical Mullah is attempting to emerge from behind the placid mask of every regular Muslim, and the sooner and more efficiently he is defeated, the better.

Frayer (2020) provides evidences for several members of the Muslim community were being targeted, verbally abused, boycotted, and discriminated against during the country's first wave of COVID-19 across the nation. A cancer hospital refused to admit Muslims unless they undergo a coronavirus test. A Muslim volunteer was attacked by a cricket bat while distributing food to the poor in Bangalore, a city in south India, killing him. Many Muslim vendors accused of selling food have since been banned. This anti-Muslim violence prompted 22-year-old Muslim youth Mehboob Ali to be attacked by a mob in his village near the Indian capital on April 5, while returning from a conference in central India. The divide between majority and minority in the mainstream media always produces a particularly harsh discourse towards minorities and their faith and customs.

Banaji & Bhat (2019) proposed a typology of disinformation and misinformation derived from an extensive dataset of content shared on social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp,

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

across four major Indian states. Their analysis emphasizes the prevalence of national and ethno-religious bigotry as central themes within these datasets. They categorized various types of disinformation or misinformation related to nationalism and ethno-religious bigotry in India as Table 1 shows. It lists different topics along with the description of the messages and their associated outcomes and effects. This data highlights how disinformation and misinformation can be used to fuel and exacerbate ethnic, religious, and political tensions, leading to real-world consequences such as violence and social division.

Table 1. Typology of Disinformation and Misinformation: National and Ethno-Religious Bigotry in Social Media Content

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Nationalism/Ethno-religious bigotry • Anti-Pakistan • Anti-Kashmiri • Anti-Muslim • Anti-Dalit • Pro-Hindu • Pro-BJP • Pro-Modi • Anti-Congress • Anti-Rahul Gandhi • Anti-Sonia Gandhi • Anti meat-eating.	• Written or mixed mode mockery of Pakistani military capabilities • Written, visual and/ or spoken questioning of the allegiance of Kashmiris to the idea of India • Memes, moving images and written texts implying Muslims responsible for population explosion • Still and moving images purporting to show Muslims praising Modi, praising BJP (including women praising Triple Talaq Bill) • Infographics and statistics praising Modi or BJP regime • Speeches of Modi or images of Modi praising Modi • Written texts, memes, mixed mode messages, still and moving images accusing Rahul and Sonia Gandhi of arrogance (eg, for having old people touch their feet) • Clips from Rahul Gandhi speeches taken out of context and bracketed with Hindutva commentary • Notes suggesting that the Gandhi family has secret Muslim lineage.	• A feeling of militant nationalism that allows for no questioning or discussion • A feeling of false victimhood in conjunction with conspiratorial exaggeration of Muslims' abilities, motives, resources • Physical violence against discriminated groups • Harassment through filing FIR at police stations • Bullying and intimidation of anyone who dares to question the status quo.

Source: Banaji & Bhat (2019)

They extended the discussion of disinformation and misinformation, focusing specifically on religious themes or ethno-religious bigotry as Table 2 shows. It categorizes the misinformation by religious groups, describes the types of messages being spread, and outlines their outcomes and effects. The detailed descriptions of these messages demonstrate how they are designed to provoke strong emotional responses and deepen religious and ethnic divisions, potentially leading to real-world conflicts and a more fragmented society.

Table 2. Themes of Religious and Ethno-Religious Bigotry in Misinformation Circulated on WhatsApp

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Religious theme or ethno-religious bigotry • Hindutva/Hinduism • Islam • Christianity • Sikhism.	• Oppression of Muslim women • Still and moving images of Hindu gurus (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Jaggi Vasudev, Baba Ramdev) defending their version of Hinduism or mocking other religions • Insulting lower-caste communities • Defending and celebrating Dalit and Adivasi leaders • Caste-based rituals and myths (*jaati puranas*) • Still and moving images of large Hindu religious marches or festivals (Kumbh Mela, Kanwariya procession) • Still and moving images purporting to show Muslims killing cattle or defiling Hindu idols or committing violence against Hindus or Muslim men luring and duping Hindu women in order to get them to marry and convert to Islam • Still and moving images of Muslims being attacked, apparently in revenge for something they have done (usually filmed and uploaded by the attackers).	• Provides grandiose illusions about moral/ethical, historical superiority of one religion over others • Provides a religious/spiritual mode of explaining various aspects of daily life • Provides a sense of strength and power in one's own religious community • Reinforces membership of religious community • Creates agitation, anger, anxiety, disgust and other emotions in users who then either share it or participate in violence (either immediate and/or anger accumulates for violence at a later point).

Source: Banaji & Bhat (2019)

3. How the Media Reinforces the National Agenda

A glance at Indian prime-time news (9 p.m. to 11 p.m. IST) may reveal a lot about the attitude and tone of the individuals involved. During these discussions, tempers flare, exaggerations and hyperbole are often used, and news anchors display dramatic fits of wrath. Singh (2015) claims that during India's primetime debate, news outlets and news editors subtly reveal their ideological allegiances. These connections—a result of financing sources, investors, and personal political beliefs—lead to partisan bias in the packaging of news and, in certain instances, are readily translated into racial prejudice. In the information age, when everything is available online minutes after it airs on TV, headlines frame opinions in addition to acting as anchor text for search engines.

Therefore, the phrases employed in headlines serve as important catalysts for the subsequent mental process and for triggering pertinent latent connections in people's minds. These headlines perpetuate negative assumptions about Muslims and serve as warning flags for society, not just as a statement by the channel. What the anchor says, what is shown on the screen in the ticker, and who is asked to participate in discussions all work together to shape how the viewer perceives the news. When considered in the context of certain events, the choice of primetime news reveals a specific agenda that determines the standards for news in the country. The primary emphasis of the news program's agenda is closely aligned with the priorities of the television management, government, and politics at large, as evidenced by the order, sources, and selection of content. As evidenced by the recurrent findings of the monitoring study, a crucial determinant of news value is the political representation or advocacy of a particular interest group on the television network. Rantanen (2009) in her study of German, Russian, and US news organizations' case studies highlights the prioritization of the advancement of national interests

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

in news reporting. These organizations serve as illustrative examples of instances. This occurs when the state intervenes, citing the national relevance of the news as justification, or when agencies leverage the national significance of the news to influence government action. National news narratives function as symbolic markers, continually reinforcing the national agenda among citizens.

Agenda-setting theory, originally established by Maxwell McCombs and his colleagues, represents a significant branch of mass communication theory. Drawing on Walter Lippmann's earlier concepts, McCombs & Shaw (1972) extended this framework through their seminal Chapel Hill study. They proposed that media exert influence primarily at the cognitive level, challenging the prevailing belief at the time that media had minimal impact. Their investigation, rooted in social dynamics, analyzed media effects during the 1940 U.S. presidential election. The findings suggested that the audience's selective attention, shaped by social factors, mediated the extent of media influence (Berard et al., 2016). As outlined in various studies, agenda-setting theory examines the role of mass media in establishing the public agenda in the context of the issues that become the focal point of societal concern. The public agenda refers to the set of issues that capture the attention and interest of the general public (Zain, 2014).

According to Coleman et al., (2009) agenda-setting refers to the process by which mass media highlight specific topics constantly and obviously, leading large segments of the public to view these issues as more important than others. In essence, the more media coverage an issue receives, the more it is perceived as important by the public. Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch (2009) has sparked discussions on related concepts such as priming and framing, the role of obtrusiveness, and the "need for orientation," which determines the conditions under which agenda-setting effects are amplified or weakened. According to Wanta et al., (2004) agenda-setting theory holds that the public learns the virtual significance of issues based on how much attention certain topics receive in the news media. This theory has been the subject of hundreds of systematic studies. Mello (2017) explained that second-level agenda-setting theory, which combine traditional agenda-setting and framing studies, thus traits associated with newsmakers influence those associated with newsmakers in the public.

As a result, the public is exposed to the framework of characteristics reported by the media. Aldamen & Abdul Jaleel (2024a) explained the process of shaping the portrayal of symbolic elites, populist governments, and a media agenda designed to mold public opinion with specific perceptions and opinions. According to their study, the representation of Rohingya refugees in Indian media for example frequently resorts to one-dimensional and stereotypical portrayal. The frequent occurrence of misrepresentation and dehumanization, identifiable through the use of language and selective reporting practices, indicates a strong alignment of most Indian mainstream media with the government's position.

Jena et al., (2021) claim in their study that the media dominate the politico-cultural narrative and shape the public discourse because they are intertwined with the majoritarian state and its politics. In other words, the media actively contributes to the majoritarian propaganda machine while simultaneously tapping into majoritarian sentiments. The two processes, however, work together and have two targets for improving the majoritarian narrative. In their analysis of the

Indian situation, they claim that Hindus are first made aware of the deviant characteristics of Muslims. Second, whenever feasible, the media end up culturally oppressing, economically marginalizing, and socially isolating Muslims. Ahmad (2014) in one of his studies on how Muslims are portrayed in Indian media as terrorists, asserts that such depictions of Muslim symbols and locations by the media serve as a certifier of the myth of the nation. He contends that contemporary media and nation are twins, and media is thus nationalist. The media reports truths seldom; instead, they conform to the dominant narrative of the nation.

4. Conspiracy Theory and Exploiting COVID-19 to Create the "Anti-National"

Mohammad & Aldamen (2023) COVID-19 has had harmful effects on all aspects including press and journalism. According to Aldamen & Abdallah (2024) the economic crisis, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has strained the resources press and journalism. The pandemic has led to the implementation of measures affecting the media environment, including restrictive measures against independent media.

Conspiracy theories are usually intended to struggle against manipulation and are underpinned by circular reasoning. Both Byford (2011) and Keeley (1999) argues that the evidence and lack of evidence against the conspiracy are misinterpreted as evidence that the conspiracy is true. Andrade (2020) identifies belief in conspiracies is prevalent in both historical and contemporary cultures and can be traced back to innate human predispositions towards religion, group consistency, and gossip.

According to the conspiracy theory, explained by Byford (2011) and Harambam & Aupers, (2019), the conspiracy is continuously seen by capable and vile bunches and is frequently politically motivated. It is based on prejudice, emotional persuasion, or insufficient evidence.

Douglas et al., (2019), Frankfurter (2021), Goertzel (2010), and Nefes et al. (2018) stated that conspiracy theories were closely associated with propaganda, prejudice, wars, hunts, conflicts, genocides, and crises. While Barkun (2015) classified three categories of conspiracy theories, initially associated with limited, well-defined, and clear events such as 9/11, systemic conspiracy theories have broader goals, usually according to (Barkun, 2003) associated with securing control of a country, region, or the whole world. Their goals are broad, while the conspiracy mechanics are generally simple, such as communism and the hyper-conspiracy theory, a theory that hierarchically ties multiple conspiracy theories together.

Walker (2013) explained that conspiracy theories could be classified into five types depending on the proposed enemies: firstly, indistinguishable from the public, the interior enemy from within the country. Secondly, the exterior enemy opposes the community from the outside. Thirdly, the enemy from above includes strong people who control events with their hands. Fourthly, the enemy from below depicts the lower classes who work to overthrow the social order, and fifthly, the conspiracy of good intentions is the power of angels working behind the scenes for a better place and helping people. As many India's national news channels and their prime-time debates abruptly exploited the event of the Tablighi Jamaat's conference, which was held in the city of New Delhi, to accuse Tablighi Jamaat of spreading COVID-19, the Indian media has been accused of promoting various conspiracy theories around COVID-19, such as suggesting that Muslims spread the virus. Such assertions reinforce the hatred against minorities such as Muslims by showing them as an internal enemy who forms a threat to the country.

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

5. Methodological Framework

5.1. Philosophical Perspective of the Research Process

The methodological framework of this study is rooted in a critical examination of the interplay between media, nation-building, and conspiratorial narratives, with a focus on their role in shaping hegemonic ideologies. Drawing from Chakravarty and Gooptu (2000), the study adopts the understanding that the concept of the nation is inherently contested, constructed through sociopolitical processes that privilege dominant groups while marginalizing others. In the Indian context, the ideological framework of Hindutva offers a compelling lens to analyze this process, as it envisions India as a Hindu Rashtra, relegating minorities, particularly Muslims, to the periphery of national identity. Ahmad (2014) highlights the role of contemporary media in legitimizing and perpetuating these exclusionary narratives, positioning media as a central actor in the construction of hegemonic myths of the nation. This theoretical grounding enables the study to interrogate how exclusions are enacted both discursively and materially through media narratives.

The study is further informed by Rantanen's (2009) analysis of media as a cultural apparatus that operates in alignment with state interests to reinforce national agendas. In the context of India, national news channels emerge as key players in promoting the majoritarian vision of Hindutva, systematically portraying minorities as threats to the imagined national unity. Through the agenda-setting lens, as theorized by Zain (2014), the study examines how media narratives dictate the public agenda, shaping societal discourse in ways that align with majoritarian ideological imperatives. Jena et al. (2021) provide critical insights into how media, far from being an impartial observer, becomes enmeshed with the political machinery of the majoritarian state, amplifying its ideological goals and functioning as a promoter of exclusionary nationalism.

Additionally, Walker's (2013) classification of conspiracies offers a theoretical framework to analyze how media narratives construct minorities, particularly Muslims, as conspirators against the nation. This study focuses on the category of internal conspiracies, which frame marginalized groups as internal enemies. The portrayal of the Tablighi Jamaat during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a case in point, where media narratives framed the group as "bio-terrorists" responsible for spreading the virus. Such representations align with Hindutva's ideological framework, reinforcing narratives of internal threat and exclusion. This methodological perspective emphasizes the integration of conspiratorial narratives within agenda-setting processes to analyze how media contributes to the marginalization of minorities.

This methodological approach is designed to critically interrogate the role of media as a powerful cultural and political actor in perpetuating systemic exclusions, with a particular focus on the intersection of Hindutva ideology, nation-building, and the framing of Muslim minorities in India.

5.2. Methodological Procedures

Based on the secondary sources studied, including newspapers, journals, research articles, news broadcasts, and discussions, it was observed that national news channels in India engaged

in a proloonged primetime discourse alleging that Muslims were involved in a conspiracy to propagate the virus.

This study is categorized under exploratory research which tries to discover something new by working through a research topic. As Swedberg (2020) states exploratory studies propose new ideas or generate new hypotheses on an old topic. Explanatory research questions tend to start with "why" or "how", and the goal is to explain why or how a previously studied phenomenon takes place.

This study aims to understand the role of the aforementioned media's narrative and representation in the process of the Hindu nationalist agenda setting and making Muslims anti-national or the nation's other.

The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: How the media reinforce the national agenda?

- RQ2: How crises such as COVID-19 were exploited to create the "Anti-national"?

Consequently, the study analyses how the television news channels, during their prime-time news hours, created the narrative framework for the articulation of such national imaginings against Muslims in India amidst the pandemic. The qualitative approach using the content analysis method was used in this study. The research sample encompasses the primetime news content of six prominent Indian television news channels, which were aired during the study's period from March 30th – April 10th.

The debate over a specific dispute is the only topic covered in the sample, and it focuses on the anchor's narratives as well as the content and hashtags shown in the news ticker during the discussion sessions.

The study utilized a qualitative research framework with content analysis as its primary method. To strengthen its methodological rigor, the research systematically identifies recurring patterns and themes within the analyzed data. Content analysis was preferred over discourse analysis for its structured and quantifiable approach to examining media content. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis are key elements of the qualitative descriptive design, frequently used to examine textual data and uncover underlying themes. A theme functions as an attribute, descriptor, or concept, serving as an implicit topic that organizes groups of recurring ideas. This approach allows researchers to systematically address the study's research questions. As a result, these methods are considered highly appropriate for thoroughly and methodically exploring the research objectives (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Given the extensive dataset comprising prime-time news broadcasts, content analysis facilitated a systematic evaluation of visible patterns and thematic frequencies. This approach is particularly well-suited for systematically identifying and interpreting patterns and themes within textual and verbal data derived from television broadcasts and secondary sources.

A theme can also be seen as a thread of underlying meaning, implicitly identified through interpretation, reflecting the subjective perspectives of participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Therefore, the themes developed and analyzed in this study are grounded in both contextual and ideological frameworks. This approach allows for a thorough examination of media content, highlighting its alignment with Hindutva ideologies and how media rhetoric reinforces

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

stereotypes and marginalizes minority communities. By utilizing both content analysis and thematic analysis, the study effectively reveals the complex layers of media narratives and their wider socio-political implications.

The study focuses on six prominent news channels: Times Now, Republic TV, India TV, Zee News, CNN-News18, and India Today. These channels were chosen for their substantial viewership, linguistic reach, and notable influence on public discourse, making them integral to India's national media landscape. The selection also accounts for linguistic diversity, as the channels primarily broadcast in English and, in some cases, Hindi—both widely used and officially recognized languages in India. By prioritizing channels with regular and impactful discussions, the study ensures a focus on media outlets that play a serious role in shaping public opinion and national narratives.

The units of analysis for this study were identified using a set of keywords—Tablighi Jamaat, Islamophobia, Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, Pandemic, and Discrimination—which were chosen to encapsulate the thematic scope and focus of the research. These keywords were selected because they encapsulate the primary themes and socio-political issues addressed in the study. Due to limitations in accessing primary data during the study period, the analysis relied on secondary data sources. These included accessible video recordings of prime-time debates, as well as academic and credible journalistic sources that specifically addressed the issues surrounding these debates or, more broadly, the themes encapsulated by the selected keywords.

Credibility of the findings is reinforced by the deliberate selection of media channels and the comprehensive examination of pertinent themes, which collectively enhance the trustworthiness of the results. The analysis followed a structured methodological framework, employing targeted keywords such as "Tablighi Jamaat," "Islamophobia," "Hate Speech," and "Discrimination" to guide data extraction from the selected media content.

This study employed a keyword-based data collection method, utilizing manual keyword assignment. The representative terms based on the content and context of the documents, rather than depending on a predefined taxonomy or automated extraction techniques were selected. This approach reflects current methodologies, where manual keyword extraction is used to support professional indexers or to generate summaries that enhance document accessibility (Rose et al., 2010).

This keyword-based approach ensured a focused and systematic examination of narratives within the broadcast material. Each keyword was chosen strategically to align with the research objectives and focus areas, ensuring that the study's scope is both comprehensive and relevant. Tablighi Jamaat was included due to its prominence in media narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. This organization was specifically targeted and accused by sections of the media of being responsible for spreading the virus. Islamophobia serves as a critical lens for examining the bias and prejudice against Muslims in media representations. The use of this keyword was restricted to the Indian context and the pandemic period to ensure a focused analysis. It underpins the study's exploration of how mainstream media perpetuates stereotypes and constructs Muslims as the "other," drawing on both critical media and academic analyses.

Pandemic was employed as a broader keyword, alongside Islamophobia, to gather international reports and perspectives on the studied phenomenon, providing comparative insights. The keywords Hate Speech and Hate Crimes were applied within the specific context of COVID-19 in India to identify secondary sources discussing prime-time debates and news coverage that demonized minority communities and glorified divisive rhetoric. Finally, Discrimination was used as a broader term, supplemented by sub-keywords such as *minority discrimination*, *Muslim discrimination*, and *Tablighi Jamaat discrimination*, to identify sources addressing the lack of substantive prime-time discussions on issues of systemic bias and exclusion during the pandemic.

The sample for the study includes six prominent national television channels—Times Now, Republic TV, India TV, Zee News, CNN News 18, and India Today—which were purposively selected based on their widespread viewership, influence on public discourse, and the regularity with which they featured discussions pertinent to the research topics during the study period. This approach ensured that the collected data represented a diverse spectrum of media narratives while addressing the constraints posed by data availability. Table 3 provides an overview of the sampled channels and their respective contributions to the dataset.

Table 3. The Six Channels Sample

	Channel	Description	Year	Links
1	**Times Now**	India's No. 1 English news channel. It is the television division of Bennett, Coleman & Company Limited (BCCL) the parent company of India's largest media conglomerate, the Times Group which owns and operates, inter alia, The Times of India, The Economic Times and Mumbai Mirror, India's leading print publications.	It was launched in cooperation with Reuters on January 23, 2006.	**https://www.timesnownews.com/** https://twitter.com/TimesNow https://www.facebook.com/Timesnow
2	**CNN News 18**	Cable News Network-News 18 (formerly known as CNN-IBN) is an Indian English-language news television channel founded by Raghav Bahl and based in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. It is now jointly owned by Network 18 Group and Warner Bros Discovery.	CNN entered India in 2005 in partnership with TV18 to launch an English news channel.	**https://www.news18.com/livetv/** https://twitter.com/CNNnews18 https://www.facebook.com/cnnnews18/
3	**Republic TV**	It was co-founded by Arnab Goswami and Rajeev Chandrasekhar who surrendered their shares in May 2019, leaving Goswami as the controlling shareholder. The venture was funded by Chandrashekhar through his company Jupiter capital private limited.	An Indian right-wing English news channel launched in May 2017.	**https://www.republicworld.com/** https://twitter.com/republic?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor https://www.facebook.com/RepublicWorld/

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

4	India TV	Hindi news channel based in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. Rajat Sharma and his wife Ritu Dhawan launched this channel on 20th May 2004. The channel is a subsidiary of the Independent News Service, co-founded by Sharma and Dhawan in 1997. The channel rebranded in February 2022.	In 1997, Rajat Sharma and Ritu Dhawan founded Independent News Service (INS), the parent company that owns India TV. He along with his wife founded India TV in April 2004 from India TV's studio in Film City, Noida.	**https://www.indiatvnews.com/** https://twitter.com/indiatvnews https://www.facebook.com/indiatvnews
5	India Today	Broadcast/media production company. India Today Group has various media companies. Publishes India Today, India's number one magazine. #1 Hindi Magazine - India Today Hindi. #1 Business Magazine - Business Today. It also publishes Indian editions of major international brands such as Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar, and Reader's Digest.	Founded in 1975 in response to an emergency in the country, its entire ethos is anchored in its core belief that independent media is the foundation of democracy.	**https://www.indiatoday.in/** https://twitter.com/indiatoday https://www.facebook.com/IndiaToday
6	Zee News	Indo-Hindi news channel owned by Subhash Chandra's Essel Group.	Released on August 27, 1999, Zee Media Corporation's flagship product.	**https://zeenews.india.com/** https://twitter.com/ZeeNews https://www.facebook.com/ZeeNews/

6. Findings and Discussion

The topics discussed during prime-time news hours on the six chosen national television channels were analyzed during the period from March 30, 2020, to April 10, 2020, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The News Topics during the Selected Period (March 30 -April 10)

#	Channel	News Topics
		March 30, 2020
1	Times Now	Aired an unauthenticated audio recording of cleric Muhammed Saad, the chairperson of the Delhi Markaz claiming "*there is no necessity for social separation and it is not mentioned anywhere in our faith*". This was the topic of prime-time discussion.
2	CNN News 18	Aired the same unauthenticated audio recording and conducted prime-time discussion
3	Republic TV	Aired the same unauthenticated audio recording and conducted prime-time discussion
4	India TV	Aired the same unauthenticated audio recording and conducted prime-time discussion
5	India Today	Aired the same unauthenticated audio recording and conducted prime-time discussion
6	Zee News	
		March 31, 2020

1	Times Now	#CoronaJihad and other divisive language beganto surface in the news ticker. Dubbed it "Markaz mayhem" and charged the Arvind Kejriwal administration with "appeasement" for failing to deal with the "super spreaders" within the NizamuddinCenter
2	CNN News 18	#CoronaJihad and other divisive language beganto surface in the news ticker. Anchor accused that the cluster case was the consequence of "enmity" with Modi. He then went on to compare this situation to terrorist attacks and suicide bombers. If the Jamaat's "Corona bombs" were "treasonous," the host questioned in his running commentary
3	Republic TV	The hashtag #CoronaJihad beganto surface in the news ticker. Arnab Goswami, the host of prime-time debate, referred to the plot as "deliberate" and "callous".
4	India TV	#CoronaJihad and other divisive language beganto surface in the news ticker. Accused that the attendees in the assembly came from 16 different nations.
5	India Today	The anchor Rajdeep Sardesai accused thatTablighi Jamaat participated in a plot to spread the Corona virus across with acute purposeful callousness" toward his nation". He questioned Jamaat adherents, in reference to the allegedly breaking visa laws by hiding in mosques overseas, with divisive language "Why are they moving into 'my nation'?", "Aconspiracy against India will have to be effectively brought down."
6	Zee News	#CoronaJihad and other divisive language beganto surface in the news ticker. Anchor questioned why the Delhi police could not intervene with "people who make a mockery of law and order and the constitution in the name of religion. In addition, he said, "Every city has sections where the police are afraid to go. One such location is Nizamuddin. The experience of crossing Nizamuddin is well known to Delhi residents. It resembles Shaheen Bagh exactly."
		April 01, 2020
1	Times Now	"Ban Taliban Tablighi; the chorus grows." appeared in the ticker as a part of prime-time discussion.
2	CNN News 18	-
3	Republic TV	The news tickers began to write about "Islamic insurrection"
4	India TV	"Ek Maulana 9 Shahar," used denoting one member of tabligh had the target to spread COVID-19 in nine cities.
5	India Today	Anchor said, "The Delhi administration, the police, and the Modi government should all be questioned about how foreign nationals were let to enter the country and reside at the Nizamuddin facility".
6	Zee News	"In the name of religion, they have placed our lives at danger," the anchor cautioned the viewers before accusing the Jamaat of pushing India into the third stage of the coronavirus illness.
		April 02, 2020
1	Times Now	
2	CNN News 18	
3	Republic TV	Anchor Arnab Goswami posted a video that went viral after false claims that he had visited Jamaat, in February 2020, of a police officer being spat on in court.
4	India TV	Anchor said that the Tablighis' "spitting habit" was undermining them. The TV station ran a clip, saying it showed a maulana promoting spitting as a defense against "bad ideas." "Which maulana is causing Jamaat's corona symptoms?" inquired a ticker running under the video. The soundtrack was gloomy and tense, and the footage was played and again.
5	India Today	
6	Zee News	Anchor Chopra created a brand-new kind of jihad called "spitting jihad" to attack Jamaat attendance.
		April 03, 2020
1	Times Now	
2	CNN News 18	Anchor Amish Devgan said: "Those responsible" for the spread were "anti-national" and "enemies of the country".

3	Republic TV	Broadcasted a video, which went viral, showing a Muslim person suspected of spreading the virus by sucking his thumb while arranging fruits in a shopping cart, and Anchor accused "*This is done purposely, and it is a heartless, cruel scheme*".
4	India TV	
5	India Today	
6	Zee News	Anchor Sudhir Chaudhary charged the Jamaat of "*lying and abandoning the country in the name of Islam*"
April 04, 2020	
1	Times Now	
2	CNN News 18	
3	Republic TV	Discussions ignited debates regarding "*shooting*" Tablighi Jamaat members
4	India TV	
5	India Today	
6	Zee News	A discussion of how Tabligis patients abused and harassed medical staff in the UP suburb of Ghaziabad, close to the Delhi border. The broadcaster confirmed that six of her were charged with violating national security laws often used against terrorists.
April 07, 2020	
1	Times Now	
2	CNN News 18	The managing editor, Amish Devgan, said on his program Aar Paar on April 7 that he had "*solid knowledge*" that Pakistan was directly to blame for the coronavirus outbreak in India. According to "*solid evidence*" provided by "*intelligence sources*," a plot to transfer the coronavirus to India was devised at the end of February during a Tablighi Jamaat gathering at a mosque in Kuala Lumpur's Petaling district. He said, "*It was done at Pakistan's command.*" The presence of Tablighis from Pakistan at the Petaling event, some false information about coronavirus in Pakistan on social media, and two images of a Muslim cleric with Pakistan's prime leader Imran Khan and the Indian preacher Zakir Naik served as the "*proof*" of Pakistan's participation.
3	Republic TV	
4	India TV	
5	India Today	
6	Zee News	
April 10, 2020	
1	Times Now	
2	CNN News 18	
3	Republic TV	
4	India TV	
5	India Today	Anchor, Rahul Kanwal looked into "madrasa hotspots," where madrasas wereallegedly "*hiding the headcount of children at a time when social distancing has been deemed as the only way to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak in India,*" disregarding the Central Government's advisory from the day before.
6	Zee News	

On March 29, all of those prime-time news interviews were focused on the conditions of thousands, if not millions, of migrant labourers. Since the government forced a lockdown for 21 days, with four hours' notice, and the unemployed, homeless, and unprepared have flowed out of cities, taking long trips on scooters, bikes, or on foot. The debate on March 29 was predicated on an increase in COVID-19 cases throughout the nation. However, as observed by Janin (2020)

overnight, an unauthenticated audio recording of Delhi Markaz's leader, cleric Mohammed Saad, changed the whole course of the primetime debate on the country's national television channel.

According to Amarasingam et al., (2022) Hindu nationalist media reports tried to make a common link among a large number of the new cases detected in many parts of the country. Hindu nationalist proposed that the virus not spreading organically throughout the country, but as a sinister plot by Indian Muslims to purposefully infect the population as Figure 1 shows. The newspaper clipping further details that a gathering of this group led to multiple cases of COVID-19, resulting in deaths and hospitalizations.

Figure 1. Hindu nationalist supporters share news reports that promote the idea of "corona jihad".
Source: (Amarasingam et al., 2022)

Every other channel, except for NDTV, concluded during the prime-time debate that Tabhlighi Jamaat members knowingly attempted to spread the disease throughout the country. The inflammatory and Islamophobic hashtag #coronajihad was displayed on news tickers of the channels like Republic TV and Times Now, following the Twitter trend. The repeated usage of words like Jihad, Maulana, Markaz, Tabligh, and Madrasa contributed to making the entire Muslim community guilty. Republic TV's news anchor Arnab Goswami initiated the narrative of otherizing Muslims from the start. His questions, which appeared in the news ticker as well, like *What do they want to do in my nation?* and *why are they moving into my nation?* primarily addressed the foreign members who attended the conference but also spread an impression of a conspiracy against the country from the side of Indian Muslims joining the foreign Muslims. A conspiracy against India will have to be effectively brought down was a direct implication of otherizing Muslims by questioning the patriotic and nationalistic attributes of the whole community of the country.

The unauthenticated videos that spread on April 3rd and 4th, which were later proved to be fake by Alt News and News Laundry, two fact-checking platforms in India, were the essence of the primetime discussions for two days. The news outlet came up with the idea of connecting the whole controversy to Pakistan, stating that it was done at Pakistan's command, which was an extension of the agenda of framing Muslims as the nation's enemy since Pakistan is considered to

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

be one of India's prime enemies. Furthermore, the anti-Muslim violence and attacks that have increased since April 5, following the initial days of anti-Muslim discourse, have not been reported or discussed in any of these news outlets. Despite the government's warning, India Today broadcasted the discussion based on their sting operation, which was later revealed to be based on fake information from the news media. The operation's title, Madrasa Hotspot, which appeared in capital letters on the news ticker, was another example of how far these news outlets went to pit symbols and terms associated with Islam and Muslims against the nation.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused unprecedented havoc globally, affecting the lives of millions of individuals. COVID-19 has had harmful effects on all aspects including press and journalism. According to Abdallah (2024) the economic crisis, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has strained the resources press and journalism. The pandemic has led to the implementation of measures affecting the media environment, including restrictive measures against independent media.

News coverage during the selected period is characterized by a high level of sensationalism, divisive language, and the propagation of conspiracy theories, particularly targeting the Muslim community in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as table 1 shows.

Table 3. The common themes from the news reports over the days listed, along with an analysis of the content

Date	Channel	Common Themes	Details and Analysis
March 30	Multiple	Airing of unauthenticated audio	Almost all channels aired an unauthenticated audio recording involving a cleric from the Delhi Markaz, sparking widespread discussion on national TV.
March 31	Multiple	#CoronaJihad, divisive language, targeting of a religious group	Channels used discordant language and hashtags, accusing the Tablighi Jamaat of intentional spread, questioning their intent and legality.
April 01	Multiple	Accusations of intentional virus spread	Discussions revolved around alleged intentional spreading of COVID-19 by the Tablighi Jamaat members, termed as "Islamic insurrection" or targeting cities.
April 02	Multiple	Misinformation and stigmatization	Various channels reported incidents of spitting by members of the Jamaat, contributing to a stigmatized portrayal with terms like "spitting jihad".
April 03	Multiple	Targeting and blame on specific community	News coverage included blaming and aggressive labeling of Muslims as "anti-national" and "enemies of the country" for the virus spread.
April 04	Zee News	Abuse and national security violations	Zee News discussed alleged abusive behavior by Jamaat patients towards medical staff and mentioned charges under national security laws.
April 07	CNN News 18	International conspiracy theories	CNN News 18's anchor claimed that Pakistan was behind the virus spread in India, citing "solid knowledge" from intelligence, but providing speculative proof.
April 10	India Today	Allegations against religious schools	Discussion focused on madrasas allegedly violating social distancing rules, portraying them as part of wider non-compliance and threat.

The frequent use of unverified information, along with charged rhetoric such as "#CoronaJihad" and terms such as "anti-Ummah," demonstrates a tendency to stigmatize a particular religious group. This approach is likely to amplify societal divisions at a time of crisis. The use of such narratives may have implications beyond the media, potentially negatively impacting public perception and behavior against the Muslim community. This type of coverage also raises concerns about journalistic ethics and the media's responsibility to provide balanced and fact-checked reporting, particularly during a global health emergency when information can significantly impact public health responses and community relations.

The analyzed news headlines and discussions suggest the utilization of propaganda and conspiracy as a mechanism for advancing agendas by inciting hostility towards the Indian Muslims. Besides what was discussed above, one of the issues that highlight the bias of Indian media, as noted by Chakravarty & Gooptu (2000), Jacob (2017), Sam (2018), and Thomas (2020) is that Republic TV has been accused of publishing fake news and frequently reporting anti-Islamic content in favor of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

In India, however, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing biases and discrimination against Muslims. Muslims in India have been subjected to COVID-19 coverage bias. This is evident in the way that certain media outlets have covered the spread of COVID-19, placing blame on Muslims and portraying them as a threat to public health. This dangerous narrative has led to an increase in hate speech and violence against Muslims, as well as increased discrimination in access to healthcare and other resources. This explains the RQ1 on how crises such as COVID-19 were exploited to create the "Anti-national".

Andrade (2020) notes that once confined to a very small audience, conspiracy theories have become commonplace in the mainstream, on the internet, and on social media. Conspiracy theories have always been present in human societies, but their rise to popularity and influence in the media is a relatively recent phenomenon. As scholar Aldamen (2023b) states in her work the proliferation of social media and the internet has made it easier for conspiracy theories to spread rapidly, often without being fact-checked or challenged. According to Aldamen & Abdul Jaleel (2024a); Wazzan & Aldamen (2023); Aldamen & Hacimic (2023) social networks play a role in the order of the recipient's priorities and concerns, as well as in shaping the public agenda when certain features of new media content, such as hyperlinks and multimedia, highlight themes or specific events Conspiracy theories pose a significant threat to the truth, as they can undermine confidence in information and contribute to the erosion of trust in institutions such as government, science, and the media.

According to Malkki (2009) to re-establish the traditional national order of things, official rhetoric set out to otherize its dangerous citizens while at the same time state policies aimed at reintegrating into the embrace of the nation those that were deemed recoverable. The Tablighi Jamaat incident generated circumstances that led to people believing in various conspiracy theories and, therefore, hatred and violence. As stated by Ahmad (2014) even though there is not any conclusive proof to support the assertions that Muslims are to blame for the virus' spread, Tablighi Jamaat is purposefully utilized to paint a negative image of the Muslim community. The venom against Muslims on TV news networks rose after reports of a rise in COVID-19 cases by the end of March 2020. In the media, names like Corona Jihad, Bio Jihad, Manav Bomb, Human Bomb, Covid-786, Spreader Moulana, and Nizamuddin Idiots were employed. Iyengar & Kumar Jain

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

(2021) highlight that, as reported by Time Magazine and the Washington Post, tweets featuring the hashtag *#CoronaJihad* were viewed by 165 million people and appeared approximately 300,000 times.

In her work Ushama (2021) argues that numerous fabrications were propagated, including that Muslims spitting on people to transmit the virus and flashing nude bodies at female medical workers. Millions of people had spread this misinformation by the time it was shown to be false. The authentication that these fake videos received by having debates about them during prime-time news hours on major news channels cannot be ignored or dismissed. According to Jena et al., (2021), the COVID-19 issues have been purposefully used as a cover for populist politicians to develop a set of discourses that promote anti-Muslim ideology and work to create the kind of climate of fear and paranoia needed to legitimize physical and symbolic violence against Muslims in India. In addition to physical acts of violence, there are other, equally destructive types of violence, such as hate speech and the demonization of Muslims in everyday life.

The media in India is known to have a significant impact on the formation of public opinion and the shaping of attitudes towards minority groups and Muslims. In the context of media competition for audience engagement, certain news coverage has the potential to generate antagonism by depicting specific groups or individuals in an unfavorable manner. The dissemination of news content that portrays certain groups as adversaries has the potential to pose a threat and exacerbate the pre-existing societal divisions.

Depending on agenda setting and framing certain issues in a way that demonizes Muslims, the media could perpetuate stereotypes and fuel resentment towards those groups, which are already marginalized or misunderstood. The portrayal of Muslims or other minority groups as enemies led to and can lead to increased hostility and violence, as people may feel justified in taking extreme measures against them. There is a link between media issues and the rising public interest in these issues.

The use of propaganda and media coverage to create enemies and advance certain agendas is a topic that has received significant attention in recent times. This is a concerning trend as it can lead to the demonization of individuals or groups who may not necessarily pose a threat, foster division within society, and create an environment in which acts of discrimination and even violence towards these individuals or groups are deemed acceptable. The numerous hate crimes committed against Indian Muslims shortly after they have been accused with propagating the virus made this abundantly obvious. These data answer the RQ2 on how the media reinforce the national agenda.

The analysis of news coverage by prominent Indian media outlets highlights a recurring pattern of sensationalism and inflammatory reporting regarding the Tablighi Jamaat and its alleged role in the spread of COVID-19. Leading channels, including Times Now, CNN News 18, Republic TV, India TV, and India Today, broadcasted unverified content, notably an audio recording attributed to Muhammed Saad, which was framed as evidence of non-compliance with social distancing norms despite lacking authentication or alignment with official public health advisories. The use of divisive terminology, such as "*#CoronaJihad*" and provocative phrases like "Ban Taliban Tablighi" and "Islamic insurrection," underscored a communal tone, potentially

exacerbating societal polarization. Moreover, conspiracy theories and baseless allegations were frequently promoted, with some reports suggesting the deliberate spread of COVID-19 by the Tablighi Jamaat and drawing comparisons to terrorist activities, including implicating foreign nationals. This sensationalist approach was further amplified through dramatic rhetoric, heightened sound effects, and emotionally charged narratives designed to provoke fear or outrage among viewers. The disproportionate focus on the Tablighi Jamaat and, by extension, the Muslim community, fostered stigmatization and deepened societal divisions, reflecting the media's role in perpetuating communal biases during a public health crisis.

7. Conclusion

Many studies have shown that the media has many important and diverse role, and especially in times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial. The fundamental role of the Indian media during the COVID-19 pandemic was called into question due to the slanted dissemination of information from biased sources. Given the divisiveness, polarization, and manipulation, the status of Indian media is worrying. The alliance of corporate and governmental interests compromises the ethical norms and principles of Indian media. The news media outlets of the country favor majoritarian feelings and ideas while marginalizing and condemning minorities and their beliefs when it comes to religion and religiosity.

The study delves into the representation of the Tablighi Jamaat during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic as portrayed across various Indian news channels. It explores the linguistic choices, thematic patterns, and narrative frameworks employed, analyzing their potential influence on public perceptions of the Tablighi Jamaat and the broader Muslim community in India.

India's national news channels played an obvious part in escalating this violence. Furthermore, their overt role in accelerating the majoritarian conspiracy against the Muslim population by framing them as the nation's enemy, through the Hindu nationalist narrative of Hindu India and the Muslim other is undeniable. The study's content analysis revealed that the coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat controversy by Indian news channels was indicative of this fact.

The suppression and misrepresentation of minority and marginalized voices, especially those of the Muslim community, in the narration and depiction of national media platforms of India has reached an all-time high, as Hindu majoritarianism has grown entrenched in Indian politics and society. The lack of credibility and reliability in bringing these circumstances into the mainstream discourse of the nation unquestionably adds to the propagation of these crimes' depth and breadth.

The media coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in India reveals a troubling pattern of sensationalism and polarizing rhetoric across major news outlets. The repeated reliance on unverified sources, such as an audio recording attributed to Muhammed Saad, coupled with the use of inflammatory terms like "#CoronaJihad" and narratives framing the pandemic as a deliberate conspiracy, highlights a significant deviation from ethical journalism. Such reporting not only risks exacerbating communal tensions but also detracts from the critical focus on addressing the public health challenges posed by the pandemic.

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

The depiction of the Tablighi Jamaat as deliberately negligent or malicious in spreading COVID-19—often without substantial evidence—has likely intensified stigmatization of the Muslim community, further straining societal cohesion at a time when solidarity and collective action are essential. The use of emotionally charged language and hyperbolic comparisons to terrorism in news headlines and discussions fosters an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, undermining efforts to manage a public health crisis that demands accurate, impartial, and fact-based communication.

This analysis underscores the urgent need for media organizations to uphold rigorous ethical standards, particularly in times of crisis when the consequences of misinformation can be profoundly damaging. As influential agents in shaping public perceptions and behaviors, media outlets must ensure their coverage does not deepen societal divisions or hinder public health initiatives. It is imperative that media regulatory bodies and watchdog organizations enhance oversight and enforce strict guidelines to curb the dissemination of incendiary content, ensuring that all reporting during such critical periods is balanced, evidence-driven, and conducive to societal welfare.

Along with the failure to accurately convey the facts, the prevalence of discriminatory or prejudiced inclinations, biases, and misconceptions towards specific individuals, groups, things, ideas, and beliefs in numerous incidents documented by the established Indian media outlets, particularly national television channels, has fanned the hate and intolerance.

Existing literature on media behavior during crises underscores the dual responsibility of the press: to inform the public accurately and to shape societal attitudes constructively. Mertens et al. (2018) emphasize that media framing of communal narratives can either foster social cohesion or intensify societal divisions, particularly in sensitive contexts involving religion and public health. The proliferation of terms such as "#CoronaJihad" exemplifies sensationalist reporting that risks escalating communal tensions, aligning with critical theory's critique of media's power to shape and reinforce divisive societal narratives.

According to McCombs & Shaw (1972) the media has a huge impact on the audience and what they should think. Prioritization is moving an issue from the media agenda to the public agenda, shifting its importance and attention. Within the framework of Agenda Setting Theory, which asserts that media not only shapes the topics the public considers important but also influences their perceptions of these issues, the coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat incident appears to have emphasized divisive and sensational narratives at the expense of balanced reporting. Such an approach risks steering public discourse in detrimental directions, potentially impacting policy decisions and public behavior negatively during a critical period requiring unified efforts for public health.

8. Limitations of the Study

Given the pivotal role the media plays in shaping public opinion and societal responses, this research tried to highlight the urgent need for sustained attention to the ethical obligations of media outlets. Media organizations wield substantial influence in shaping public discourse, particularly during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, making ethical media practices a central area for reform and scrutiny.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The temporal scope of the analysis is confined to a specific, short-term period of media coverage, which may not fully capture broader, long-term trends in reporting practices. Moreover, the research relies solely on publicly available broadcast content and lacks access to internal editorial discussions, thus limiting the ability to examine the underlying motivations behind coverage decisions. The study does not incorporate a quantitative assessment of the impact of media coverage on public attitudes or behaviors, an area that warrants further empirical investigation for a more comprehensive understanding of the media's influence. The study does not assess the actual influence of the news coverage on public opinion or community relations, as such an evaluation would require dedicated surveys or empirical research.

References

Ahmad, I. (2014). Kafka in India: Terrorism, media, muslims. In *Haplo Repository* (pp. 289–329). Oxford University Press. https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/85470/kafka-in-india-terrorism-media-muslims

Alam, M., & Zaini, S. (2021). COVID-19 and the plight of the migrant worker in India. *Community, Work & Family*, 24, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.1975651

Aldamen, Y. (2017). The role of print and electronic media in the defense of human rights: A Jordanian perspective. *Jordan J. Soc. Sci*, 10(1), 119–13. https://doi.org/10.12816/0040694

Aldamen, Y. (2023a). Can a negative representation of refugees in social media lead to compassion fatigue? An analysis of the perspectives of a sample of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey. *Journalism and Media*, 4(1), 90–104. https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4010007

Aldamen, Y. (2023b). How the media agenda contributes to cultivating symbolic annihilation and gender-based stigmatization frames for Syrian refugee women. *Language, Discourse & Society*, 11(No. 2(22), 2(22), 108–128. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10291208

Aldamen, Y. (2023c). Refugee journalist phenomenon as a consequence of migration and refugee crises: The role of social media in transferring refugees' role from "has been affected" to "has affected." *Studies in Media and Communication*, 11(6), 358–370. https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i6.6202

Aldamen, Y. (2023d). Understanding social media dependency, and uses and gratifications as a communication system in the migration Era Syrian refugees in host countries as a case study. *Social Sciences*, 12(6), 322. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12060322

Aldamen, Y. (2023e). Xenophobia and hate speech towards refugees on social media: Reinforcing causes, negative effects, defense and response mechanisms against that speech. *Societies*, 13(83). https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13040083

Aldamen, Y. (2024). Ürdün'de dergicilik: Kurulması ve gelişimi. *İletişim ve Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 4(1), 67–92. https://doi.org/10.59534/jcss.1405592

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

Aldamen, Y. (2025). Social media, digital resilience, and knowledge sustainability: Syrian refugees' perspectives. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 25(1), 57–69. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v25i1.1010

Aldamen, Y., & Abdallah, A. (2024). Dialogical health communication via Twitter (X) during COVID-19 in African countries: Ghana as a case study. *World*, 5(4). https://doi.org/10.3390/world5040049

Aldamen, Y., & Abdul Jaleel, D. (2024a). A depiction of Rohingya refugees in India's online news platforms following the shift in the Indian government's stance in 2017. *Societies*, 14(8), 140. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14080140

Aldamen, Y., & Abdul Jaleel, D. (2024b). Stimulation of the collective memory of the 1999 Turkey earthquake through the Turkish media coverage of the 2023 earthquake. Online J. Commun. Media Technol. 2024, 14, e202420. [. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 14(2), e202420. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/14407

Aldamen, Y., & Hacimic, E. (2023). Positive determinism of Twitter usage development in crisis communication: Rescue and relief efforts after the 6 February 2023 earthquake in Türkiye as a case study. Soc. Sci. 2023, 12, 436. *Social Sciences*, 12(8), 436. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12080436

Amarasingam, A., Umar, A., & Desai, S. (2022). "Fight, die, and if required kill": Hindu nationalism, misinformation, and Islamophobia in India. *Religions*, 13(5), 380. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050380

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.*

Andrade, G. (2020). Medical conspiracy theories: Cognitive science and implications for ethics. *Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy*, 23(3), 505–518. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-020-09951-6

Asmer Beg, M. (2008). Globalization, Muslims, and the Indian media. In K. W. Shands (Ed.), *Neither East Nor West: Postcolonial Essays on Literature, Culture and Religion* (pp. 143–156). Södertörns högskola.

Balabantaray, S. R. (2022). Coronavirus pandemic and construction of false narratives: Politics of health (hate) and religious hatred/ hate crimes in India. *Sociología y Tecnociencia*, 12(2), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.24197/st.2.2022.307-322

Banaji, S., & Bhat, R. (2019, November 11). WhatsApp vigilantes: An exploration of citizen reception and circulation of WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India. *Lse.Ac.Uk*.

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America. Berkeley*.

Barkun, M. (2015). Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge. *Diogenes*, 62(3–4), 114–120.

Basu, D. (2021). Majoritarian politics and hate crimes against religious minorities: Evidence from India, 2009–2018. *World Development*, 146, 105540. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105540

Berard, R., Gabers, C., & McKell, D. (2016). Communication strategy in quarterly earnings calls: The importance of tone and agenda setting theory. *6th International Engaged Management Scholarship Conference.*

Bhat, S. H. (2019). Muslim characters in Bollywood cinema: Representation and reality. *Journal Of Humanities and Social Science*, *24*(12), 6–16.

Bose, S. (2018). *Secular states, religious politics: India, Turkey, and the future of secularism* (iv ed., Vol. i). https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/29AF1F532C0FFF2AFA82B28E8F713B1E

Bose, S. (2019, June 21). *Modi and the other idea of India.*

Byford, J. (2011). *Conspiracy theories: A critical introduction.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://books.google.jo/books?id=m5Er9ELOwQkC

Chadha, K., & Kavoori, A. (2008). Exoticized, marginalized, demonized: The Muslim "other" in Indian cinema. In A. Punathambekar (Ed.), *Global Bollywood* (pp. 131–145). New York University Press.

Chakravarty, R., & Gooptu, N. (2000). Imagi-nation: The media, nation and politics in contemporary India. In B. S. E. Hallam (Ed.), *Cultural Encounters: Representing "Otherness"* (1st ed., pp. 89–107). London: Cultural Encounters.

Coleman, R., McCombs, M., & Weaver, D. (2009). Agenda setting. In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (pp. 167–180). Routledge.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*(Suppl 1), 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Faizan, M. (2020, April 16). *The coronavirus spread and the criminal liability of the Tablighi Jamaat.* https://thewire.in/communalism/coronavirus-criminal-liability-of-tablighi-jamaat

Frankfurter, D. (2021). Religion in the mirror of the other: The discursive value of cult-atrocity stories in mediterranean antiquity. In *History of religions* (Vol. 60, Issue 3, pp. 188–208). University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1086/711943

Frayer, L. (2020). Blamed for coronavirus outbreak, Muslims in India come under attack. *Pandemic Response and Religion in the USA: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender.*, *31.* https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic-race/3

Goertzel, T. (2010). Conspiracy theories in science. *EMBO Reports*, *11*(7), 493–499. https://doi.org/10.1038/embor.2010.84

Hallam, E., & Street, B. (2000). *Cultural encounters representing otherness* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2019). From the unbelievable to the undeniable: Epistemological pluralism, or how conspiracy theorists legitimate their extraordinary truth claims. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(4), 990–1008. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419886045

Hussain, S., Usman, A., Habiba, U., Amjad, A., & Amjad, U. (2019). Hate crimes against Muslims and increasing Islamophobia in India. *Journal of Indian Studies.*, *5*(1), 7–15.

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD

Journal of Media and Religion Studies

Iyengar, K., & Kumar Jain, V. (2021). COVID-19 and the plight of migrants in India. *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 97(1149), 471–472. https://doi.org/10.1136/postgradmedj-2020-138454

Jacob, J. (2017, September 23). "Never Be Afraid", says Arnab Goswami. But how about not lying? *Boomlive.* https://www.boomlive.in/never-be-afraid-says-arnab-goswami-but-how-about-not-lying/

Janin, R. (2020, April 21). *Covid-19: How fake news and Modi government messaging fuelled India's latest spiral of Islamophobia.* https://scroll.in/article/959806/covid-19-how-fake-news-and-modi

Jena, A., Yadav, R. A., & Rambarki, R. (2021). Demonizing the others: Vendetta coverage of Tablighi Jamaat and Kumbh Mela during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. *Media Asia*, 48(4), 346–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.1946282

Keeley, B. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *Journal of Philosophy Inc*, 96(3), 109–126. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1084585

Khan, A. (2022). Identity as crime: How Indian mainstream media's coverage demonized Muslims as coronavirus spreaders. In *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse. Communicating Covid-19 and Public Health Strategy.* (1st ed., pp. 355–373).

Kumar. (2020, March 22). India puts 30,000 in lockdown after preacher dies of virus. *Arabnews.* https://www.arabnews.com/node/1649566/world

Kumar, H. (2013). Constructing the Nation's Enemy: Hindutva, popular culture and the Muslim "other" in Bollywood cinema. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(3), 458–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340

Malkki, L. (2009). National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1, Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference), 24–44. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1992.7.1.02a00030

McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176–187. https://doi.org/10.1086/267990

Mello, A. (2017). Media and public opinion: Case study comparison of the mensalao and petrolao corruption scandals in Brazil. Doctoral dissertation. *University of Oregon.* https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/items/e6ee38a0-8d61-4c58-b69f-fc509363fd39

Mohammad, R., & Aldamen, Y. (2023). Media dependency, uses and gratifications, and knowledge gap in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Afghanistan and Turkey. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 13(3), e202324. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/13097

Nefes, T., Dyrendal, A., G. Robertson, D., & Asprem, E. (2018). Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion. In *Chapter 18 Framing of a Conspiracy Theory: The Efendi Series* (pp. 407–422). Brill, Brill. https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004382022/BP000022.xml, https://brill.com/view/title/39101

Rantanen, T. (2009). *Nationalization. In when news was new*. https://doi.org/abs/10.1002/9781444310870.ch6

Reporters Without Borders. (2019, May 29). Media ownership monitor: Who owns the media in India? *Reporters Without Borders*. https://rsf.org/en/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india

Rose, S., Engel, D., Cramer, N., & Cowley, W. (2010). Automatic keyword extraction from individual documents. In *Automatic Keyword Extraction from Individual Documents* (pp. 1–20). Wiley Online Library.

Sam, J. (2018, January 4). *Darkness in Jama Masjid, conversion rate card and 10 more fake news stories spread by media in 2017*. https://scroll.in/article/863542/darkness-in-jama-masjid-conversion-rate-card-and-10-more-fake-news-stories-spread-by-m

Shands, K. W. (2008). *Neither east nor west: Postcolonial essays on literature, culture and religion* (3rd ed.). Södertörns högskola University College.

Sharma, P., & Anand, A. (2020). Indian media coverage of Nizamuddin Markaz event during COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Politics & Policy*, *12*(4), 650–654. https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/aspp.12561

Singh, J. (2015). *Trends in primetime news: Study of selected news channels in India*. *1*(1), 14–29.

Singh, K. (2024, February 26). Anti-Muslim hate speech soars in India, research group says. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/india/anti-muslim-hate-speech-soars-india-research-group-says-2024-02-26/

Swedberg, R. (2020). *Exploratory research. In: Elman C, Gerring J, Mahoney J, eds.* (pp. 17–41). Cambridge University Press.

Tazamal, M. (2022, December 20). 2022 Islamophobia in review: India. *Bridge. Georgetown University*. https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/2022-islamophobia-in-review-india/

Thomas, P. (2020). Handbook of religion and journalism,. In *Journalism and the rise of Hindu extremism: Reporting religion in a post-truth era* (pp. 232–244). Routledge.

Ushama, T. (2021a). Islamophobia in India during the Covid-19 crisis: A surge of stigmatization, vilification and murder. *Al-Shajarah*, *26*(1), 71–98.

Ushama, T. (2021b). Islamophobia in India during the COVID-19 crisis: A surge of stigmatization, vilification, and murder. *ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, *26*(1), 71–98. https://doi.org/DOI: https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v26i1.1227

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, *6*(5), 100–110. http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100

Wahl-Jorgensen, K., & Hanitzsch, T. (2009). *The handbook of journalism studies*. Routledge.

Walker, J. (2013). *The United States of paranoia: A conspiracy theory*.

Conspiracy Propaganda or Media Agenda-Setting? The Representation of
Muslims in Indian Media as Anti-National during the COVID-19

MEDİAD
Journal of Media and Religion Studies

Wanta, W., Golan, G., & Lee, C. (2004). Agenda setting and international news: Media influence on public perceptions of foreign nations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *81*(2), 364–377. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900408100209

Wazzan, A., & Aldamen, Y. (2023). How university students evaluate the role of social media in political polarization: Perspectives of a sample of Turkish undergraduate and graduate students. *Journalism and Media*, *4*(4), 1001–1020. https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4040064

Zain, N. R. M. (2014). Agenda setting theory. *International Islamic University Malaysia*, 1–11.