

Designing a Conceptual Model of the Journalistic Approach of Arab Newspapers in Covering Health News

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, as one of the most significant public health crises of the present century, placed the media at the forefront of information dissemination, public opinion guidance, and crisis management. Considering the importance of the role of the media in representing health crises, the present study aimed to analyze the journalistic approach of Arab newspapers in covering health and hygiene news related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to design a conceptual model in this field. This study employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 experts in the fields of media, health communication, and journalism in Iraq. The process of open, axial, and selective coding was conducted using MAXQDA software. The findings led to the extraction of a conceptual model consisting of four main dimensions: "discursive approach," "news coverage style," "type of sources used," and "journalistic objectives," each of which included specific components and indicators. Based on thematic analysis, the media's approach was largely centered on reinforcing official narratives, reducing the role of civil society, and focusing on authoritarian policies in the representation of the crisis. By presenting a conceptual model, this study provides a framework for systematically understanding the journalistic behavior of Arab media during health crises and can serve as a theoretical basis for critical analysis of health communication in similar contexts.

Keywords: health journalism, Arab newspapers, COVID-19, media representation, conceptual model.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed the global media landscape, particularly in its function as a principal mediator between scientific knowledge, political authority, and public perception. As one of the most significant health crises of the twenty-first century, the pandemic revealed not only the strengths but also the vulnerabilities of media systems across diverse socio-political contexts.

Media institutions—both traditional and digital—became central actors in shaping public understanding of the pandemic, constructing narratives of risk, and mediating between scientific expertise and everyday experience (Garfin et al., 2020). In the Arab world, as elsewhere, newspapers and broadcast outlets assumed a dual responsibility: to inform the public with accurate health information and simultaneously to navigate political pressures, ideological constraints, and institutional interests (Ali et al., 2022).



The study of media behavior during health crises has long been informed by classical communication theories. Lasswell's functionalist model positioned communication as essential for surveillance, correlation, and the transmission of social heritage (Lasswell, 1948), while Berger and Luckmann emphasized the role of communication in the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Later developments in sociology and media theory, including Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), Althusser's ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971), and Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), highlighted the entanglement of media institutions with political and ideological structures. Similarly, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge (Foucault, 1972) and Hall's conceptualization of representation (Hall, 1997) foregrounded the discursive dimensions of media narratives, underscoring their role in shaping identities and subjectivities. These theoretical perspectives remain indispensable for understanding the Arab press during COVID-19, where health news coverage was situated at the intersection of state authority, cultural values, and journalistic practice.

The Arab media environment has long been characterized by a tension between authoritarian state control and emerging independent voices. Al-Rawi's comparative study of Gulf States illustrates the enduring limitations imposed on press freedom, even in moments of crisis (Al-Rawi, 2021). Hamdy further argues that transparency and trust—vital components of effective health communication—were often undermined by institutional secrecy and political calculations (Hamdy, 2023). These institutional dynamics echo Hallin and Mancini's typology of media systems, where Arab states resemble polarized pluralist models marked by state intervention and instrumentalization of media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In such contexts, news organizations often act as ideological extensions of the state, resonating with Althusser's notion of media as apparatuses reproducing dominant ideology (Althusser, 1971).

The pandemic also accentuated the role of media framing in constructing public health discourses. Entman's seminal definition of framing as the selection and salience of aspects of reality (Entman, 1993) provides a lens through which Arab newspapers' portrayals of COVID-19 may be understood. Research during the

pandemic demonstrated how frames oscillated between reassurance and fear, mobilization and blame (Omar, 2024; Shehata & Adel, 2024). Asadi and colleagues, in their study of misinformation on Iranian Telegram channels, identified a "crisis of journalism" wherein speed, sensationalism, and political agendas undermined factual accuracy (Asadi et al., 2024). Similarly, Murad et al. highlighted how Arab newspapers sometimes reproduced misinformation, whether intentionally or due to limited verification mechanisms (Murad et al., 2021). Apuke and Omar's work on fake news sharing confirms that structural and psychological predictors—such as trust in institutions, digital literacy, and emotional resonance—contributed significantly to the spread of unreliable content (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

Cultural and political considerations also influenced how Arab newspapers represented the pandemic. Salem underscores the role of traditional media in risk communication, observing that coverage often privileged political leaders' voices over medical experts (Salem, 2023). Rostambeik Tafreshi's corpus-based discourse analysis shows that print media in Iran employed linguistic strategies that alternated between dramatization and reassurance (Rostambeik Tafreshi, 2023), echoing Hoshiyar and Mehdizadeh's findings on how discourse formation in Middle Eastern news outlets relies heavily on power-laden frames (Hoshiyar & Mehdizadeh, 2020). These practices are consistent with Kraidy's argument that Arab media systems frequently negotiate between creative insurgency and ideological conformity (Kraidy, 2020).

The representational strategies used in health crisis coverage also intersect with questions of identity and collective psychology. Jaspal and Nerlich have shown how COVID-19 reporting shaped perceptions of identity threat and coping strategies (Jaspal & Nerlich, 2020), while Hadeed documented how Afghan television failed to address psychosocial needs in its pandemic reporting (Hadeed, 2020). Such findings reinforce Goffman's frame analysis, which highlights how media narratives organize experiences and guide interpretations (Goffman, 1974). In the Arab press, this often manifested as a binary discourse—oscillating between panic-inducing statistics and reassuring narratives of recovery—producing a communicative environment marked by instability and contradiction (Ahmadi et al., 2021).

Beyond framing, agenda-setting theory provides further explanatory power. McCombs and Shaw demonstrated decades ago that the salience of issues in media correlates with public perceptions of importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and subsequent refinements of the theory confirm its enduring relevance (McCombs, 2005). During COVID-19, Arab newspapers prioritized stories of infection rates, government policies, and international comparisons, often at the expense of exploring mental health implications or structural inequalities (Jafari et al., 2022). Such patterns are consistent with Garfin et al.'s findings that media exposure can amplify public health consequences, intensifying both fear and misinformation (Garfin et al., 2020).

The broader theoretical landscape of media and power remains crucial in this analysis. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis situates media language as both reflecting and reproducing social hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995), while Bourdieu underscores the symbolic violence embedded in linguistic practices (Bourdieu, 1991). Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how consent is manufactured through subtle ideological work (Gramsci, 1971), and Foucault's insights on discourse and power illustrate how knowledge about the pandemic was filtered through institutional mechanisms (Foucault, 1972). Together, these perspectives underscore that Arab newspapers' coverage of COVID-19 was not merely informational but deeply political, shaping subjectivities and reinforcing existing power structures.

Nevertheless, there were also opportunities for transformation. Alvandi et al.'s content analysis of Iranian television revealed that the pandemic stimulated debate about the role of expert voices in health communication (Alvandi et al., 2022). Hamdy emphasizes that the crisis opened new possibilities for strengthening transparency and trust (Hamdy, 2023), while Shehata and Adel argue that distortion and manipulation, though prevalent, also exposed the urgent need for media reform (Shehata & Adel, 2024). Mutsvairo and Ristow's global perspective shows that crises, while exacerbating weaknesses, also function as catalysts for innovation and institutional learning (Mutsvairo & Ristow, 2021). In the Arab context, this suggests a dual trajectory: a persistent reliance on official narratives and political priorities, but also a

recognition of the necessity for specialized health journalism and more participatory forms of communication (Omar, 2024).

Media campaigns during the pandemic further demonstrated the capacity of communication to shape health behavior. Wakefield et al. provide evidence that mass media interventions can change health-related practices when strategically implemented (Wakefield et al., 2010). Yet, in the Arab press, such efforts were often uneven, constrained by institutional limitations and political sensitivities (Ali et al., 2022). Hall's and Fairclough's critical perspectives remind us that these communicative choices are embedded within broader cultural and ideological struggles (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1997).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to design a conceptual model of the journalistic approach of Arab newspapers in covering health news during COVID-19. By analyzing the coverage of newspapers such as *Al-Sabah*, *Al-Watan*, and *Asharq Al-Awsat* between 2019 and 2021, this research aims to map the interplay between institutional structures, discursive strategies, and developmental capacities in health crisis reporting. It builds upon the insights of classical communication theory (Lasswell, 1948), social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and contemporary critical approaches (Bourdieu, 1991; Entman, 1993; Foucault, 1972) to offer a systematic understanding of how Arab newspapers mediated the COVID-19 crisis.

By integrating the findings of regional and international scholarship (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Al-Rawi, 2021; Ali et al., 2022; Apuke & Omar, 2021; Hamdy, 2023; Jafari et al., 2022; Murad et al., 2021; Mutsvairo & Ristow, 2021; Omar, 2024; Salem, 2023; Shehata & Adel, 2024), this study contributes to the development of a conceptual framework for analyzing journalistic practices during health crises. It emphasizes the interdependence of political institutions, journalistic norms, and cultural discourses in shaping media responses to emergencies. Ultimately, the research argues that the Arab press during COVID-19 operated within a state of fluctuation—oscillating between institutional loyalty and professional responsibility, between fear-inducing narratives and reassuring frames, and between reactivity and the potential for critical, participatory journalism.

2. Methodology

The research method was conducted with a qualitative approach using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This method is suitable for extracting and categorizing latent themes in textual and verbal data, providing a flexible framework for identifying semantic structures, journalistic styles, and media orientations. The participants included university professors and academic experts in the fields of communication, media, and public health who possessed specialized knowledge or experience in health news coverage and media behavior during health crises. Using purposive theoretical sampling, with consideration of academic expertise and scholarly background, 13 university professors from the fields of communication, health journalism, and public health in Iraq were selected. The selection criteria included having research or teaching experience in the subjects of health and media, availability for interviews, and familiarity with the developments in Arab media during the COVID-19 crisis. The data collection tool was the semi-structured interview, the questions of which were designed based

on the theoretical framework of the research. Content and theoretical validity: the interview questions were pilot-tested by three academic experts. Participatory validity: the extracted themes were returned to five interviewees for confirmation. To assess reliability, coding was conducted simultaneously by two researchers. The agreement rate in coding themes was calculated as 85%, indicating acceptable reliability of the analysis. The analysis was performed according to the six standard phases of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data (repeated reading and initial note-taking), generating initial codes (deriving conceptual codes from the interview transcripts), searching for themes (clustering codes into central concepts), reviewing themes (evaluating and refining relationships between codes and subthemes), defining and naming themes (assigning precise titles for each theme), and producing the final report (developing the analytical narrative accompanied by key quotations). MAXQDA software was used for the qualitative data analysis.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the qualitative section

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	10
	Female	3
Age	Less than 45 years	1
	46–55 years	5
	More than 56 years	7
Education	Master's degree	2
	PhD	11
Work experience	Less than 10 years	2
	11–20 years	6
	More than 21 years	5
Total	13	100%

3. Findings and Results

Step One: Familiarization with the Data

In order to achieve deep understanding and broad mastery over the content of qualitative data, it is essential for the researcher to rigorously engage in the process of data immersion. Immersion in the data means active and systematic engagement with the collected texts, such that the researcher, through repeated and reflective reading, moves beyond surface-level interpretations and penetrates the underlying layers of

meaning. This rereading should be conducted with an analytical approach, in a way that each review of the data provides an opportunity to discover implicit meanings, hidden patterns, and new semantic structures. In this stage, the researcher, relying on the theoretical framework of the study and in light of the research objectives, proceeds to extract indicators, initial codes, and relevant signs from the interview transcripts. This process not only requires theoretical sensitivity toward concepts but also demands intellectual readiness to

accept the complexity and multilayered nature of qualitative data. Effective immersion facilitates the identification of internal relationships within the data and allows an analytical understanding of their cultural, social, and semantic context, thus paving the way for the formation of initial themes.

Step Two: Generating Initial Codes

After the immersion and deep familiarization stage, the second step of the analysis process begins with the objective of producing initial codes. In this step, the researcher, based on their analytical understanding of the data, proceeds to extract preliminary codes. Codes are essentially analytical labels assigned to parts of the data that highlight features, concepts, or phenomena considered meaningful or noteworthy by the researcher. Initial coding refers to breaking the data into smaller semantic units and assigning conceptual labels to them. These codes may reflect either superficial concepts or deeper interpretative meanings of the data. Flexibility of the researcher is of particular importance in this stage, as codes can be extracted from analytical units of varying size (such as words, sentences, paragraphs, or even sections of narratives). The basis of coding in this step is data-driven, meaning that codes are directly derived from the text of the data and constitute an objective representation of the initial themes inherent in the data. The purpose of initial coding is to create a preliminary map of scattered meanings within the data, which, in the later stages of analysis, will be refined, integrated, and categorized to form the main and sub-themes.

Step Three: Searching for Themes

In the third step of the thematic analysis process, the focus is on categorizing the extracted codes into potential categories and systematically organizing the coded data summaries within these categories. At this stage, the researcher begins the preliminary analysis of the generated codes and, in an inductive manner, attempts to identify conceptual relationships among the various codes. The main objective of this process is to combine related codes in order to form broader and more meaningful categories.

In this step, the researcher, by employing techniques such as screening, merging, and integration, identifies and consolidates repetitive codes or codes with similar meanings. Simultaneously, unnecessary or less significant codes are removed, thereby enhancing the conceptual coherence of the emerging categories. At this

stage, categories function as preliminary semantic clusters that organize the indicators extracted from the interview texts and provide an initial framework for more in-depth analyses.

Achieving Theoretical Saturation

Based on the data analysis conducted with MAXQDA software, theoretical saturation was achieved in interview number 11. This means that at this point, no new meaningful information was obtained that could extend or deepen the existing categories. The collected data had reached a level of repetition and sufficiency indicating the completion of the data collection process within the research objectives.

Step Four: Reviewing Themes

The fourth step of the thematic analysis process begins when the researcher has generated an initial set of themes and then proceeds to review and refine them. This step includes two essential stages: reviewing and refining the themes. In the first stage, the review is performed at the level of coded data summaries. The researcher examines whether the related codes within each theme have semantic coherence and whether each theme is meaningfully supported by the data. If the codes assigned to a theme lack logical correlation or conceptual consistency, the theme must be redefined, divided, or merged.

In the second stage, the researcher evaluates the validity and adequacy of the themes in relation to the entire dataset. This broader-level review assesses the extent to which the themes align with the raw data and their ability to represent the broader meanings embedded in the data. If the conceptual map generated from the themes and categories demonstrates appropriate coherence, comprehensiveness, and analytical coverage, the researcher may proceed to the next stage of analysis. However, if the identified themes lack internal consistency or are incompatible with the original data, the coding and categorization process must be revisited, and this cycle is repeated until a satisfactory and coherent model is achieved. At this stage, the indicators extracted from the interview texts, after initial categorization, are further refined, with redundant, repetitive, or analytically irrelevant indicators eliminated in order to strengthen the clarity and coherence of the research framework.

Step Five: Defining and Naming Themes

The fifth step of the thematic analysis process begins when a satisfactory and relatively stable map of categories and themes has been obtained. At this stage, the researcher undertakes the precise definition, final review, and in-depth analysis of the themes that have been developed to explain the data.

Initially, each theme is defined independently, meaning that the nature of each theme, its conceptual boundaries, and the aspects of the data it represents are clearly determined. These definitions assist the researcher in clarifying which dimensions of the experiences or meanings in the data are encompassed by each conceptual category and how they relate to other themes. A precise review at this stage ensures that the themes are distinct from one another, internally homogeneous, and valid in relation to the dataset as a whole.

Subsequently, the process of naming the main and sub-themes takes place. The researcher selects for each conceptual cluster, derived from the interview texts, a clear, precise, and descriptive label that, while concise, conveys the semantic essence of the theme. These names must reflect the core content of the data and avoid ambiguity or overlap with other themes.

In this step, data analysis is also pursued with greater depth. The researcher examines the internal aspects of each theme and supports the themes with documented evidence from the data in order to form a coherent theoretical structure of the research findings. In this way, the process of thematic analysis reaches a stage in which themes act as tools for understanding the hidden meanings within the data and establish the final interpretive framework of the research.

Table 2

Main and Sub-Themes of the Research (Axial Coding)

Overarching Themes	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
News Policy-Making and Institutional Response to the Health Crisis	Media Approach to the Health Crisis	1. Reactive and episodic coverage instead of strategic and continuous coverage 2. Fluctuation between reassurance and fearmongering 3. Instrumental use of official data and narratives 4. Lack of balance between scientific information dissemination and crisis control 5. Absence of a coherent communication strategy at the national or regional level 6. Media reactivity instead of guiding public opinion
	Institutional Differences in News Coverage	7. Distinction among state-owned, partisan, independent, and specialized media in content prioritization 8. Differences in the extent of using health journalists and scientific consultants 9. Lack of consistency in language, tone, and editorial policies 10. Disparity in the level of analysis and depth of health news coverage 11. Institutional inconsistency in interpreting, translating, and transferring international data
	Editorial Policies for Improving Health Coverage	12. Employing specialized journalists and providing continuous training 13. Developing a unified guideline for health communication 14. Strengthening the relationship between editorial boards and health institutions 15. Revising the prioritization of health content compared to political issues
	Framework of Source Selection in Health News Production	16. Dominance of official government sources over narratives 17. Limited reliance on credible local sources 18. Occasional use of international sources without contextual analysis 19. Lack of diversity and balance in source selection 20. Insufficient attention to validating non-official sources
Media Discourse-Building Approaches in Health	Structure of Health Content in Media Representation	21. Excessive focus on daily statistics and data 22. Lack of scientific and analytical content about the virus 23. Dominance of emotional and story-based narratives 24. Lack of comprehensive coverage of psychological and social aspects 25. Superficial representation of prevention and treatment mechanisms
	Media Narratives about the Disease	26. Using victim stories to evoke emotions 27. Exaggerated narratives of the health crisis 28. Focus on recovery stories to create hope 29. Portraying the disease as an all-encompassing and uncontrollable threat 30. Presenting contradictory narratives of the disease (between panic and reassurance)
	Linguistic Style and Psychological Impacts of Media	31. Using catastrophic headlines and sensational language 32. Use of reassuring and realistic language 33. Linguistic negligence in covering scientific information 34. Inducing fear or hope through word choice
	Media Balance between Information Dissemination and Political/Cultural Considerations	35. Publishing unverified information to avoid political tension 36. Censoring or removing reports related to corruption or inefficiency 37. Excessive sensitivity to cultural values and taboos 38. Efforts to maintain neutrality in dealing with regional developments 39. Inability to balance scientific information dissemination with political requirements
Media Interaction with Audience and Society	Media Responsiveness to Public Opinion	40. Reflecting society's psychological curve (panic, doubt, indifference) 41. Broad engagement with audiences through live programs and surveys 42. Republishing user-

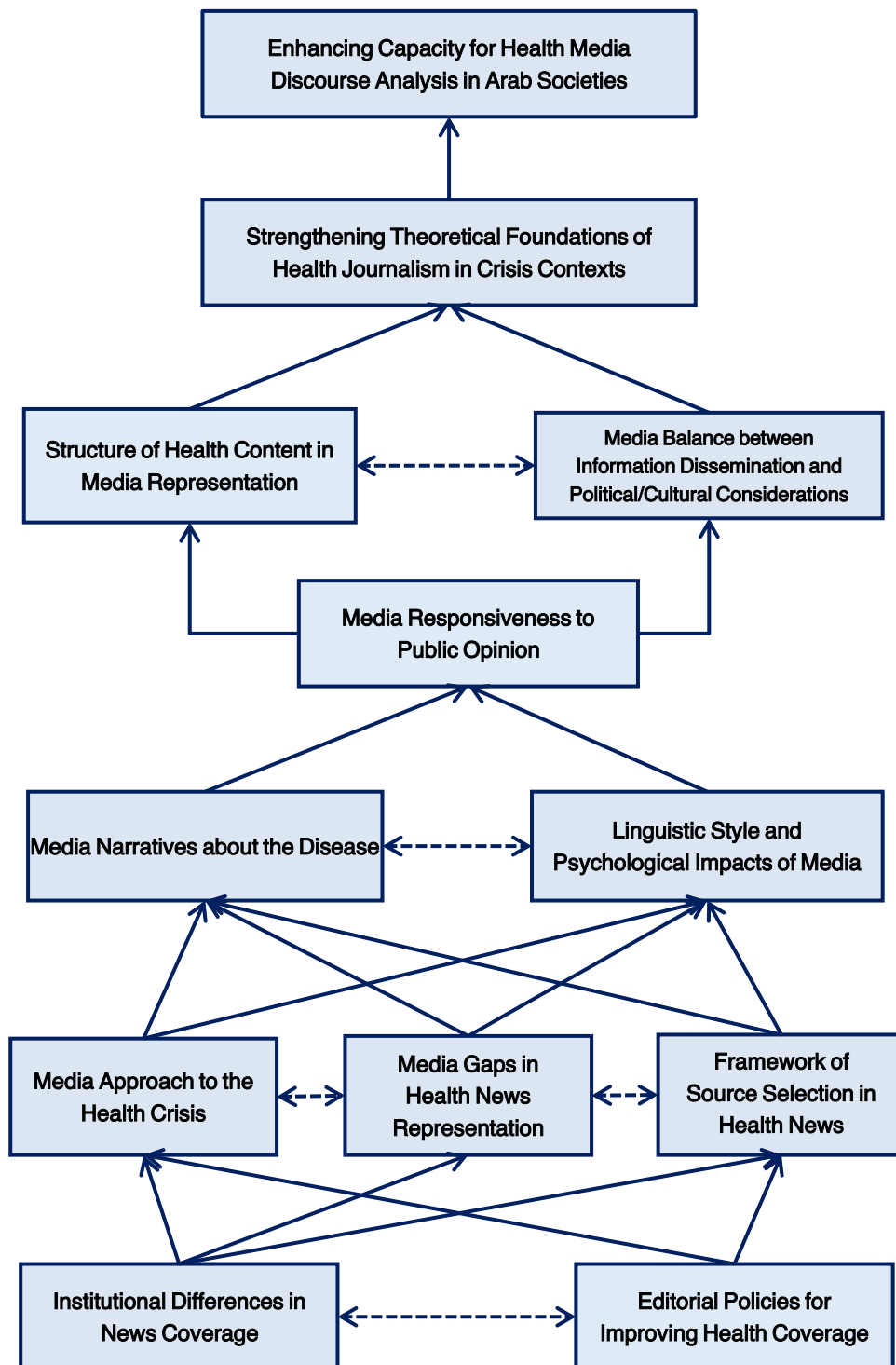
Theoretical Reflection and Capacity Development in Health Journalism	Media Gaps in Health News Representation	generated content (such as personal experiences) 43. Formation of social dialogue about prevention and vaccination 44. Ignoring the psychosocial dimensions of the crisis 45. Insufficient coverage of vulnerable groups and shadow victims 46. Lack of explanatory information on disease mechanisms and consequences 47. Dominance of emotional headlines and superficial information over in-depth analyses 48. Uneven crisis coverage among local, partisan, and independent media
	Strengthening Theoretical Foundations of Health Journalism in Crisis Contexts	49. Developing concepts of health crisis journalism based on Arab media experiences 50. Analyzing the role of media framing in the social construction of disease realities 51. Re-examining the functions of print media in risk communication management 52. Strengthening critical approaches to the role of media in shaping health discourses 53. Linking health communication knowledge with theories of discourse, semantics, and power
	Enhancing Capacity for Health Media Discourse Analysis in Arab Societies	54. Increasing researchers' analytical ability to identify health news discourses 55. Application of thematic analysis and discourse analysis in Arab media studies 56. Developing health-oriented media literacy for both specialized and general audiences 57. Empowering journalists and editors to produce scientific-critical content 58. Establishing theoretical foundations for critiquing power, ideology, and bias in health news

Step Six: Preparing the Report

The present study, through the examination and categorization of descriptive codes derived from interview texts, identified 58 sub-themes. Considering their semantic similarity and proximity, these were grouped into 12 main themes: media approach to the health crisis, institutional differences in news coverage, editorial policies for improving health coverage, framework of source selection in health news production, structure of health content in media

representation, media narratives about the disease, linguistic style and psychological impacts of media, media balance between information dissemination and political/cultural considerations, media responsiveness to public opinion, media gaps in representing health news, strengthening the theoretical foundations of health journalism in the context of crisis, and enhancing the capacity for health media discourse analysis in Arab societies.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Journalistic Approach of Arab Newspapers in Covering Health and Hygiene News on COVID-19 (Case Study: Al-Sabah, Al-Watan, Asharq Al-Awsat) for the Period 2019 to 2021



The final model presented in this study is the result of analyzing 13 specialized interviews with journalists, media professors, and public health experts. Through open, axial, and selective coding, 12 main categories were identified. This model demonstrates that the journalistic approach of Arab media during the COVID-19 crisis is influenced by three main axes:

Institutional and Editorial Structure

This includes news policy-making, source selection methods, organizational differences, and the absence of a clear communication strategy. In this axis, media outlets often faced a conflict between institutional loyalty and professional mission.

Discursive and Linguistic Structure

This encompasses themes such as linguistic style, narrative construction, psychological impacts of

messages, and interaction with the audience. The dominant pattern was dual discourses (fear/hope, threat/reassurance), which caused media messages to fluctuate in meaning.

Structural Weaknesses and Developmental Capacities

These include media gaps in representing health news, weaknesses in covering marginalized groups, neglect of mental health, as well as developmental opportunities such as strengthening health journalism and empowering editorial teams.

This model describes the media as being in a state of “fluctuation, influenced by official sources, and largely reactive,” and emphasizes that in order to transition toward analytical, scientific, and participatory media, transformation in policy-making, training, discursive literacy, and institutional independence is necessary.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive conceptual model of Arab newspapers’ journalistic approaches to covering health news during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying 58 sub-themes grouped into 12 main categories. These categories highlight three overarching axes that structured coverage: institutional and editorial dynamics, discursive and linguistic frameworks, and structural weaknesses coupled with developmental capacities. This multifaceted model reveals how Arab newspapers operated in a state of fluctuation—torn between professional journalistic standards and institutional loyalty, between fear-inducing narratives and attempts at reassurance, and between reactive responses and the potential for constructive, participatory journalism.

A central result of the study concerns the predominance of institutional and editorial structures in shaping news policy, source selection, and the prioritization of content. The dominance of official sources and the absence of coherent national or regional communication strategies placed Arab newspapers in a position of dependency on governmental narratives. This reliance produced coverage that frequently oscillated between amplifying state discourses and downplaying independent or civil society perspectives. These findings align with earlier scholarship emphasizing the limited independence of Arab media systems and their close entanglement with political authority (Al-Rawi, 2021; Hamdy, 2023). The

result resonates with Althusser’s conceptualization of media as ideological state apparatuses that reproduce the dominant ideology (Althusser, 1971), while Gramsci’s notion of hegemony provides a useful framework for understanding how newspapers sought to secure consent through selective dissemination of information (Gramsci, 1971).

The analysis also revealed striking differences between state-owned, partisan, independent, and specialized media in their prioritization of content and reliance on health experts. State-owned outlets tended to highlight official press releases and daily statistics, whereas independent or specialized outlets showed greater variation in framing. However, even in more autonomous newspapers, the overall lack of editorial coherence and national strategy hindered the development of consistent health communication. These results are consistent with Hallin and Mancini’s typology, where Arab media systems reflect polarized pluralist models characterized by political instrumentalization and weak professionalization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The discursive and linguistic structures uncovered in this study also shed light on how Arab newspapers constructed COVID-19 as a social and health phenomenon. Media discourse alternated between dualistic frames of fear and reassurance, threat and hope, often producing contradictory signals for audiences. Such fluctuations resonate with Entman’s definition of framing as a process of selection and salience (Entman, 1993) and with Goffman’s frame analysis, which emphasizes how narratives shape the organization of experience (Goffman, 1974). For instance, the frequent reliance on catastrophic headlines created panic, while simultaneously, recovery stories and reassurances of government effectiveness attempted to mitigate public fear. This duality echoes Jaspal and Nerlich’s findings that COVID-19 reporting triggered identity threats and coping responses in ways that were deeply shaped by representational strategies (Jaspal & Nerlich, 2020).

The findings confirm that sensationalism, dramatization, and emotional storytelling were frequently employed, often at the expense of in-depth scientific and analytical content. This corresponds with Hadeed’s observation that Afghan television neglected audiences’ psychosocial needs in favor of dramatic portrayals (Hadeed, 2020). Similarly, Salem highlights how Arab traditional media privileged political elites’ voices over those of medical

professionals (Salem, 2023). These dynamics are reflective of Foucault's argument that discourse is structured by relations of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972), as well as Fairclough's assertion that language practices reproduce social hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995). By privileging official narratives, Arab newspapers reinforced existing hierarchies while leaving little space for critical or participatory voices.

Another important result relates to structural weaknesses in representing health crises. Newspapers often failed to cover marginalized groups, neglected the psychosocial dimensions of the pandemic, and rarely provided explanatory content on disease mechanisms or long-term consequences. Instead, coverage was dominated by daily case statistics and surface-level reporting. These findings align with Ahmadi et al.'s comparative study of Iranian and BBC Persian coverage, which revealed similar shortcomings in addressing broader social dimensions (Ahmadi et al., 2021). They also echo Jafari et al.'s comparative analysis of Iranian and German television, where Arab media systems provided limited attention to structural inequalities (Jafari et al., 2022).

At the same time, the study identified developmental capacities, including the potential for strengthening health journalism and empowering editorial teams through training and critical engagement. These opportunities resonate with Mutsvairo and Ristow's global perspective, which underscores that crises can serve as catalysts for innovation and institutional learning (Mutsvairo & Ristow, 2021). In the Arab context, the pandemic revealed both the vulnerabilities and the transformative possibilities of media systems, suggesting that future progress requires greater independence, specialized training, and discursive literacy (Omar, 2024).

These findings can also be interpreted through the lens of agenda-setting theory. The study shows that newspapers consistently highlighted daily infection rates, vaccination campaigns, and governmental policies, while neglecting structural social issues such as economic inequality or mental health. This is consistent with McCombs and Shaw's original formulation of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and its subsequent refinements (McCombs, 2005), which argue that the issues emphasized by media become salient in public perception. In the Arab context, this agenda-

setting function was shaped by political imperatives and institutional pressures, demonstrating how media salience can simultaneously inform and distort public understanding.

Framing and agenda-setting combined to create a mediated reality that was both informative and distorted. The tendency to oscillate between fear-inducing and reassuring frames highlights the instability of media discourses during crises. These dynamics reinforce Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality, which argues that knowledge is produced through shared symbolic systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Arab newspapers constructed COVID-19 as both a threatening, uncontrollable crisis and a manageable challenge under state leadership, producing contradictory representations that left audiences in a state of uncertainty.

Trust, transparency, and credibility emerged as significant themes in the findings. Participants emphasized the need for more consistent communication strategies, greater reliance on scientific expertise, and enhanced media literacy. These findings corroborate Hamdy's argument that trust and transparency were often compromised during the pandemic (Hamdy, 2023), as well as Shehata and Adel's findings on distortion in Arab media coverage (Shehata & Adel, 2024). Moreover, Murad et al. documented how misinformation circulated in Arab newspapers, underscoring the urgency of reforming verification processes (Murad et al., 2021). Apuke and Omar's research on fake news sharing complements this, showing that misinformation thrives where trust and transparency are weak (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

Beyond these structural critiques, the results highlight the central role of discourse in shaping public health communication. Rostambeik Tafreshi's analysis of Iranian print media demonstrates how language choices create interpretive frames (Rostambeik Tafreshi, 2023), a dynamic also observed in Arab newspapers. Hoshiyar and Mehdizadeh found similar tendencies in Middle Eastern media discourses, where linguistic strategies reproduced dominant narratives (Hoshiyar & Mehdizadeh, 2020). These findings resonate strongly with Hall's and Fairclough's insights on representation and discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1997).

The study also contributes to theoretical debates about media, ideology, and crisis. The results reflect Althusser's

claim that media apparatuses reproduce state ideology (Althusser, 1971), but also reveal opportunities for contestation and transformation. Kraidy's discussion of creative insurgency in Arab media (Kraidy, 2020) and Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) suggest that even under restrictive conditions, media practices can generate new forms of agency and resistance. The Arab press's fluctuating narratives during COVID-19 may thus be understood as a site of struggle between hegemonic forces and emergent professional practices.

Finally, the results also reflect broader concerns about the relationship between media and health behavior. Wakefield et al. demonstrated that mass media campaigns can significantly influence health behavior (Wakefield et al., 2010). In the Arab context, however, inconsistent strategies and political sensitivities undermined such efforts. The findings suggest that while newspapers played a role in promoting preventive measures and vaccination, their lack of consistency, overreliance on official narratives, and neglect of psychosocial dimensions weakened the overall effectiveness of communication.

This study, while comprehensive in its qualitative analysis, is limited in scope and generalizability. The reliance on semi-structured interviews with 13 participants, though methodologically sound for thematic analysis, restricts the breadth of perspectives, particularly from marginalized voices within the media sector. Furthermore, the focus on three newspapers within a defined period (2019–2021) constrains the applicability of findings to broader media ecologies across the Arab world. The absence of audience-centered data also limits insights into how news coverage was interpreted and acted upon by diverse publics.

Future research should expand the dataset to include a larger and more diverse sample of newspapers and digital outlets across different Arab states, enabling cross-national comparisons that account for variations in political systems and media freedom. Audience studies, including surveys and focus groups, would provide valuable insights into how media discourses influenced public perception, trust, and health behaviors. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracing coverage beyond the acute crisis period could illuminate how media narratives evolve over time and how institutional learning or reform emerges in response to crises.

In practical terms, the findings emphasize the urgent need for Arab media organizations to strengthen their professional capacities in health journalism. Training journalists in scientific literacy, risk communication, and ethical reporting would enhance the accuracy and depth of coverage. Editorial policies should prioritize transparency, diversification of sources, and inclusion of marginalized perspectives, while resisting excessive political instrumentalization. Finally, building collaborative relationships between media outlets, health experts, and civil society organizations can foster more participatory, trusted, and effective health communication in future crises.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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