

Research Paper



Examining the role of headlines in news framing

Arpita Chowdhury*^{ID}

*Master's Scholar Journalism and International Affairs, University College Dublin, Ireland and Accredited journalist, National Union of Journalists (UK/Ireland).

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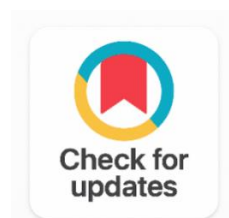
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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of headlines in the framing of news articles in print media, analyzing how they act as pivotal tools in shaping public interpretation and perception. Drawing on the theoretical foundation laid by scholars such as Entman, Baden, and Parenti, this research highlights the influence of headline language, tone, and accompanying visuals in constructing a narrative. The study focuses on two case examples from Indian national dailies: The Times of India and The Telegraph. Through qualitative analysis, it reveals how headlines not only serve as attention-grabbing hooks but also reflect editorial intentions and sociopolitical leanings. The headline "Donald Trump's Death" by TOI exemplifies linguistic play used for brand impact, while "It took 79 days for pain and shame to pierce into 56-inch skin" by The Telegraph illustrates emotional and political framing through satire and cultural reference. This paper argues that headlines, though often underestimated, operate as self-contained frames capable of influencing news reception, reader engagement, and even shaping political discourse. The findings prompt a reevaluation of the journalistic function of headlines, positioning them as critical elements of media framing theory.

Corresponding Author:

Arpita Chowdhury

Master's Scholar Journalism and International Affairs, University College Dublin, Ireland and Accredited journalist, National Union of Journalists (UK/Ireland).

Email: chowdhuryarpita@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

When interpreted literally, the word 'Framing' can be understood as a deliberate attempt to put boundaries around a certain entity and cut out whatever falls outside of it. Just like printed photographs,

or in today's time even digital images are framed and are displayed on the mantelpiece or posted online. There is a need to understand that by engaging in the act of 'framing' one has already left out a lot of elements and has chosen to portray only a certain aspect of a given situation.

Delineating more about the concept of framing, Baden [1] says "framing theory holds that the specific selection of communicated aspects matters because it leads recipients to construct different frames, and thus derive different meanings" (p. 231). When applied to the arena of News and Journalism, this statement argues that any news piece when disseminated in the public arena also sets to define a certain happening or what is called 'news' through a particular lens. This lens is then provided to the audience through which they look at the information provided to them.

Arguing further [2] goes on to emphasize that the act of framing is an attempt to focus on selected aspects of information and provide a pre-defined angle to the story. [2], [3] This further solidifies the argument that Framing indeed demarcates solid boundaries for the audience to absorb and interpret news. In news pieces, headlines are an essential element. Outlining the utility of headlines, [4] argues.

Headlines are purposely read for the sake of a quick and loose news update, are skimmed in morning TV front-page press overviews, are daily browsed in newsstands, and are studied in academic courses on media or language genres as self-contained linguistic units. (p. 702) Therefore, for any news piece published in print, the headline plays a crucial role in defining the fate of the news piece. Given the reduced attention span of readers in the present age, a headline not only gives an overview of the news but also enables the audience to decide whether to read further.

Given the importance of headlines in news stories, their role in framing also requires attention. While it may well be argued that headlines alone cannot decide how a story is perceived but headlines are the formal introduction of a reader to a news piece and thus are carefully construed. [5] Argues, "Through the use of various peripheral framing devices, a story can be packaged to influence our perception of its content. The most common accoutrements in the print media is, of course, the headline." (p.235). The statement further solidifies the argument that headlines provide the first introduction to a news story and thus can make or break its impact and influence on the audience.

2. RELATED WORK

McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting hypothesis [6] underscores the hierarchical influence of mass media on public priorities, a perspective echoed in Thussu's exploration of infotainment [7] and Rao's analysis of India's media globalization [8]. From a methodological standpoint, Krippendorff's content-analysis protocols [9] and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis guidelines [10] inform the qualitative rigor of this study. Tandoc Jr.'s distinction between gatekeeping and amplification in social media [11] examination of hate politics in journalism [12] further contextualize the evolving digital news ecology. Seminal cultural theorists Barthes [13] and Hall [14] provide additional semiotic and reception frameworks pertinent to headline analysis.

Prior research on media framing theory underscores the influential role of headlines in shaping audience perceptions. Robert [2] defined framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient. Christian Baden [3] further explores the mechanics of how audiences construct meaning based on the selective emphasis present in media narratives. [4] Emphasizes the linguistic function of headlines as self-contained units that offer immediate summaries and interpretive cues for readers. Multiple scholars have investigated the interaction between headline design and audience cognition. [15] Contends that visual stimuli, when paired with evocative language in headlines, enhance retention and emotional response. [16] Discuss the effects of clickbait and editorial strategies on audience trust and credibility, especially in digital journalism. Their findings highlight that while clickbait increases engagement, it risks undermining long-term credibility if misused.

[1] Analyze the use of cultural metaphors and political satire in news framing, especially in conflict reporting. Their framework is applicable to case studies where satire is used to critique political authority. [17] Argue that storytelling in journalism has shifted towards framing news as narratives rather than just facts, supporting the case for studying headlines as narrative entry points. While numerous studies have analyzed framing at the article level, fewer have treated headlines as standalone frames with independent

power to influence interpretation. This paper builds upon and fills this gap by treating the headline as a micro-frame and studying its language, visual pairing, and socio-political implications.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering this a basis for the analysis, the essay will examine the role of headlines in news framing in the context of the following news pieces published in two National Dailies of India:

CASE 1: "Donald Trump's Death" published in Times of India [18].

CASE 2: "It took 79 days for pain and shame to pierce into 56-inch skin" published in The Telegraph [19]

Through the analyses, the essay will argue that headlines form a vital part of news framing and perform various roles such as attention-grabbing and introducing a slant as far as interpretation of the news content is concerned. This study employs a qualitative research design that emphasizes the interpretive analysis of news headlines within the theoretical framework of media framing. The selected method allows an in-depth exploration of how headlines function as micro-frames capable of guiding reader perception even before the article body is consumed.

The primary methodology used in this paper is content analysis, focusing on two headline examples from Indian print media: "Donald Trump's Death" [18] and "It took 79 days for pain and shame to pierce into 56-inch skin" (The Telegraph, 2023). These examples were selected due to their wide circulation, public attention, and rich framing techniques that encompass both linguistic and visual elements.

Content Analysis was Conducted in a Structured Manner

1. **Headline Deconstruction:** Each headline was broken down into constituent parts such as word choice, grammar, tone, and syntax.
2. **Contextual Backgrounding:** The socio-political background of each headline's publication was considered to provide contextual relevance.
3. **Visual Accompaniment:** Images paired with each headline were analyzed to identify how visuals reinforced or altered the framing.
4. **Comparative Framing Analysis:** The two headlines were compared against each other to identify variations in tone, ideological leaning, and framing techniques.

Additionally, theoretical concepts from [2], Baden [1], and Parenti [5] were applied to interpret findings. Supplementary literature was consulted to validate the observational outcomes, ensuring academic rigor.

To support the analysis, Table 1 presents a comparative breakdown of linguistic elements, tone, and word choice strategies used in the two case headlines. Table 2 supplements this with an overview of visual elements and their framing impact. These tables help demonstrate the alignment between textual choices and intended audience reception.

This multifaceted approach ensures that both the linguistic and paralinguistic elements of headlines are examined, making this study robust and comprehensive in its analysis of headline framing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CASE 1: Times of India and the Headline Triumph

Following the assassination attempt of then Former United States President Donald Trump at one of his campaign rallies in Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024, the Times of India (TOI) published (on July 15, 2024) a front-page lead article with a three-word headline "Donald Trump's Death" [18]. Interestingly, the headline gained more traction than the actual news. Digital forums such as social media platforms caught on to the frenzy around the headline and started commenting on it. While some applauded the newspaper organisation for engaging in clever wordplay to grab reader attention, others blamed TOI for spreading false news. Some readers also considered it to be a spelling mistake on the part of the proofreader which is a partially correct assumption because as per grammar rules the word 'Trump' is a proper noun that should have been accompanied by an apostrophe however, if that would have been the case then the headline

would have turned into a fake news. What TOI did in reality is that it used 'Trump's' as a verb hence the missing apostrophe while the 'T' was kept in the upper case. This phenomenon is succinctly summarised by Ludlow (1988) in a sentence, "Generally speaking, however, they [headlines] are remembered only when they err." (p.237)



Figure 1. Screen Grab of the LinkedIn Post Made by Times of India. (LinkedIn, 2024)

As shown in Figure 1, it can be seen how the organisation has used the frame of language politics to grab attention and has overtly endorsed the high traction the headline has received ever since. Phadke in an article titled 'Donald Trump's Death', Times of India Headline Invites Mixed Reactions' (2024) notes, "Editors often use catchy headlines to draw readers' attention without distorting facts in any way to narrate a news story most effectively." In the case of the headline under investigation, whether the facts were distorted or not is still a question that needs further probe however, the attempt to frame a serious and negative story in a positive light that depicts Trump's triumph over death is an interesting way in which the audience is introduced to the issue. According to [20] public opinion on trust in news media in India, the Times of India garners the highest percentage of 71% which leads to another argument of how media brands use their trust base as a window for experimentation. While the headline amassed mixed responses, the appreciation of the wit indicates an underlying trust on the editorial capacities of the media organisation. It should be noted that this apparent experimentation could have backfired given the intensity of the actual news matter but the fact that the worse did not happen acted as a light at the end of the tunnel.

The said headline, when viewed from the perspective of intent, the notions of sensationalism and clickbait can very well be roped into the line of inquiry. [16] Maintain that the role of a copyreader is pivotal when it comes to ensuring that no headline goes out for print with a dishonest or malicious intent to grab eyeballs for publicity's sake. To take this argument further, another endorsement post as shown in Figure 2, can be brought to light.

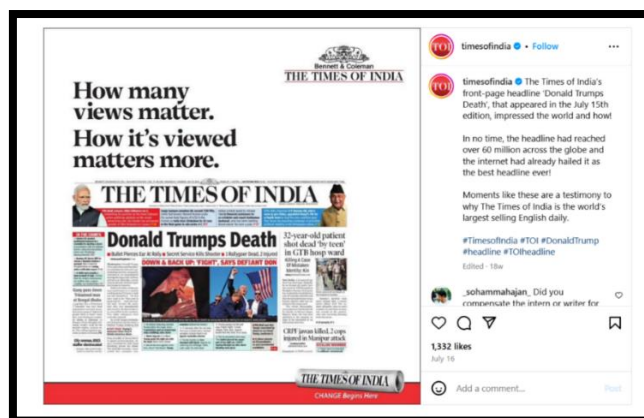


Figure 2. Screen Grab of the Instagram Post Made by Times of India. (Instagram, 2024)

The endorsement post makes an interesting point about how a particular news piece is ‘viewed’ also matters to a great extent when it comes to framing. Whether perceived negatively or positively, the headline did manage to re-solidify the brand image and the fact that the editor decided to go ahead with the headline indicates the editorial guidelines of the media house in particular and its ability to strike a fine balance between journalistic integrity and brand positioning. As shown in Figure 1, the organization has used the frame of language politics to grab attention and overtly endorsed the traction the headline received. This is further supported by the visual promotion shared on Instagram, as shown in Figure 2. A comparative breakdown of audience responses is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Audience Response Categorization for TOI Headline

Reaction Type	Description	Platform
Positive	Appreciated clever wordplay and editorial risk	LinkedIn, X
Negative	Accused of spreading misinformation	Instagram, Reddit
Neutral/Analytical	Noted grammar ambiguity, editorial justification	News forums

As shown in Table 1, the headline from The Times of India employs ambiguous grammar and active voice to generate a dual interpretation. This technique, reinforced by the visual framing, contributes to both sensationalism and perceived editorial wit. In contrast to this point of view, it can very well be argued that the said headline is a ‘clickbait’ given its usage of words and positioning. If not supplemented with context and additional information, it can lead to false assumptions. Alluding to this, [16] offer a solution atleast for online readers as they go on to argue, “...clickbait headline on the homepage complemented by a traditional headline on the story itself could address the needs of both heavier and lighter users. (p. 16) The supplementary headline used in this case was “Bullet pierces ear at rally, secret service kills shooter” [18] which provides enough context for the story however it should be kept in mind that in the print version, the bold typeface of the main headline overpowers reading navigation.

Apart from the tone, positioning, and intent of the headline, the role of the accompanying image can also not be ignored in this case. The news story under investigation uses a featured image which is a collage of two pictures positioned parallelly, one depicts Donald Trump leaning down with a bleeding ear and another shows Trump with his fists high in the air. Hence, alluding to the idea of Graber [15] who highlights that visual images contribute heavily towards creating the intended drama, the positioning of the image contributes to the inherent slant in the news story that uses the word “defiant don” as an adjective for Trump. Thus, creating a ‘rising from the ashes’ imagery which when viewed in accompaniment with the headline gives away the frame of the story.

CASE 2: The Telegraph and the Myth of 56-Inches

When it comes to conflict reporting, there can be several ways in which a piece of news can be framed but the usage of satire and visual imagery coupled with wit opens up new avenues of how ‘difficult’ stories can be told. With reference to Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi’s media address (on July 20,

2023) to the horrific incident of ethnic strife in the Indian state of Manipur, India's National daily The Telegraph published a front-page lead headline (on July 21, 2023) which was an interesting combination of art and text as shown in Figure 3. The headline reads "It took 79 days for pain and shame to pierce into 56-inch skin" [20]. The headline is further accompanied by images of crying crocodiles.

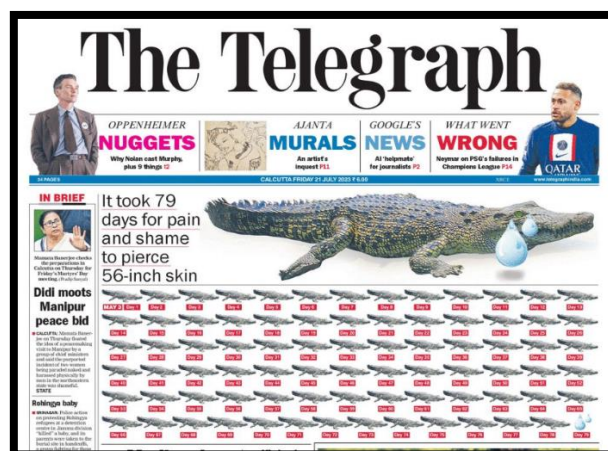


Figure 3. Front Page of the Telegraph Newspaper. [Print] [20]

[1] Found that when it comes to coverage of conflict-ridden stories journalists have resorted to a few techniques and all of them can be applied to explain the framing technique used in the headline under investigation. The first technique that [1] talk about is the attempt to use cultural frameworks to make the news relatable. In this case, the headline makes judicious use of the metaphor of "crocodile tears" used very colloquially in Indian households to denote "fake repent or pretending to be remorseful." The headline cleverly plays on this widely popular metaphor to convey the idea that the remorse that was depicted by Prime Minister Modi is fake and in case it was real, the headline also points towards the fact that this response should have arrived much earlier.

As can be seen, the crocodile only cries on the 79th day after the violence has happened. The term "56 inches" also fits into the rubric of cultural embedding as this term gained popularity as Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014 and boasted of his 56-inch chest as a symbol of machismo, power and courage. Since then, this term has been synonymous to the name of the Prime Minister. The said headline has cleverly used this term and changed its meaning to critique the indifference of the ruling party leader.

As per Weinblatt and Baden (2018), journalists also attempt to engage in political commentary through framing. In the current case too, the headline picks sides on the spectrum of ideological divisions and depicts notions of partisanship. Here it should be noted that the newspaper's leanings also come into play when a story is framed from a certain angle. As per [1], journalists also attempt to engage in political commentary through framing. In the current case too, the headline picks sides on the spectrum of ideological divisions and depicts notions of partisanship. Here it should be noted that the newspaper's leanings also come into play when a story is framed from a certain angle.

[1] Also talk about the act of making the audience involved in the story with the use of emotions. This technique precisely holds ground when it comes to the role of framing in guiding the audience to interpret the story in a specific manner. The headline under investigation sways the public opinion right at the outset. Interestingly the headline does not provide a lot of context as to what is the story about despite that the audience would have invariably understood the messaging given that the story had already unfolded a day prior. The idea conveyed through the headline alludes to the popular expression "A picture is worth a thousand words," often associated with various sources. The emotional appeal and visual structuring of the headline invoke both laughter and pathos thus expressing the underlying gruesomeness of the actual story and the satire poked at the people in positions of power. As illustrated in Table 2, the front-page layout paired with visuals (crocodiles) enhances the emotional and political message.

Table 2. Framing Techniques in Telegraph Headline

Technique	Description	Outcome
Cultural Metaphor	"Crocodile tears" implying fake remorse	Reinforces satire
Iconic Phrase Usage	"56-inch chest" referencing PM Modi	Challenges authority
Visual Irony	Cartoon crocodiles crying	Invokes emotional response

According to the data in Table 2, The Telegraph headline uses satire and culturally loaded phrases to project strong critique. Visual elements such as the illustration of crocodiles serve to deepen the emotional and symbolic framing of the event. The headline which although was and is being applauded for its wit, the primary function of it was to draw the audience's attention towards a serious issue that is being ignored. The very act of mainstreaming it calls for emotional appeal. Highlighting the need to induce drama to create an impactful story [15] notes, "In fact, to create a dramatic impact, print stories often try to draw on exciting visuals stored in the audience's memory. Visual stimuli excel in creating a sense of drama" (p. 90). The image of the crocodiles will first grab attention and then induce curiosity because of its very nature of presentation and only after that will interested readers dive deep into the news piece. Driving home the point that the headline deploys the human-interest frame in a quirky manner for the sole purpose of captivating.

[2] Argues that journalists act as mediators who process the frames pushed by power holders such as political associations, reshape them as per journalistic standards and then go on to provide those frames to the mass audience for interpretation. This process creates stock frames through which any news is read or understood. The headline in question has partially rejected this argument and has gone against the tide of normative framing to portray an idea that no other media house has portrayed. It engages in questioning the authority under the garb of satire. [17] Define this approach to framing as predefined angles to establish marked difference from other angles used for the same story.

Although the headline is 'unique' and goes against the traditional rules of headline writing, the critical question is whether picking sides sways away from the ethical principles of objectivity and fairness. Even without providing much context at first, the headline does create an anti-establishment narrative which leads one to ask whether it is journalism or propaganda. Delineating further on this, [5] argues.

The most effective propaganda is that which relies on framing rather than on falsehood. By bending the truth rather than breaking it, using emphasis, nuance, innuendo, and peripheral embellishments, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity. (p. 230)

The argument is essential in defining how news values and journalistic boundaries are negotiated to tell a story and also frame it simultaneously. The jaywalking of framers between the thin line that sets journalism and advocacy apart is what defines how a story/headline will be written and interpreted. While the headline under investigation is overtly biased towards one side of the spectrum but it very well relies on framing to convey a difficult subject of ethnic strife and the government's alleged silence on it.

Tandoc Jr. highlights how social media alters the classic gatekeeping model by acting as both gatekeeper and amplifier [11], while discuss the emergence of hate politics within contemporary journalism [12]. These perspectives, grounded in Barthes' semiotic analysis [12] and Hall's encoding/decoding framework [14], reinforce the argument that headlines operate as powerful signs shaping audience interpretations.

5. CONCLUSION

This essay examined the role of headlines in framing of news. Through the seminal definitions of [2], Parenti [5] Baden [1], a framework was established to understand news framing and how headlines are written with a purposive angle. By situating the framing theory in two contemporary news pieces published originally in the print, it was established that a headline can also be analyzed not only as a part of the news but an entity in itself that defines the frame of a news story.

[18] Defined how linguistic choices and language politics can play into the semantic interpretation of a news headline. The headline also enabled the essay to delve deeper into the issues of brand positioning

and how it defines editorial choices and narrative generation. [20] Depicted the use of clever imagery, culturally loaded terms and satire to express a viewpoint on a conflict-ridden story. Through the lens of this story, the essay looked into the boundaries of advocacy and journalism. Thus, in essence, it can be argued that the role of headlines in news framing is extremely significant and opens up a new line of inquiry where headlines can be studied as independent information units.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing-Review& Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. This research did not involve human subjects, personal data collection, or interviews requiring informed consent.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal research requiring institutional ethical approval.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are included within the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Arpita Chowdhury is a writer, poet, and journalist currently pursuing her second Master's in Journalism and International Affairs at University College Dublin as the V.V. Giri Global Excellence Scholar. A former reporter at All India Radio, her research explores cinema, media culture, and post-truth. Arpita holds a journalism diploma from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and a degree in English Literature from Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi. She writes for national and international publications and has trained as a journalism fellow with CNN Academy in Abu Dhabi and London. Her poetry collection *To the Soul* was launched at the International Book Fair 2024. Email: chowdhuryarpita@gmail.com