

“To what extent do media narratives during periods of crisis serve public stability rather than institutional self-interest?”

***Abstract*—This study examines whether media narratives during crises primarily serve public stability or institutional self-interest, using a qualitative case study of the UK COVID-19 communication campaign. Considering 3 framework theories, the research analyses how institutional messaging shapes public perception. The findings suggest that crisis narratives operate through a dual function, simultaneously promoting public stability while reinforcing institutional authority through controlled framing and repetition.**

I. Introduction

Modern-day crises utilize media as a powerful tool, one that constructs narratives capable of influencing public perception and often providing reassurance during periods of uncertainty. Scholars have developed several theoretical frameworks to examine this phenomenon, including Media Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), which explores how media organizations present and emphasize particular aspects of events; Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), which examines how media influences the issues audiences perceive as important; and Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), which analyzes how institutions communicate during periods of uncertainty and emergency. Together, these frameworks contribute to an ongoing debate over whether state-mediated narratives primarily serve collective public welfare or protect institutional authority. By examining the UK Government's ‘*Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives*’ campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper argues that media narratives do not simply choose between public stability and institutional self-interest; rather, they can utilize public stability as a mechanism of persuasion (Burke and Demasi, 2023).

II. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research construction and a singular empirical case study on the UK’s institutional position in the midst of COVID-19 as referred to above. By examining a time of extensive economic discontent and political schism during the pandemic, this research is able to analyse the intricacy of narrative texts and symbols, reinterpreted within the age of digital media. The validity offered by qualitative work enables the examination of extensive thematic media discourse and narrative

propaganda often overlooked by statistical quantitative data. Primarily, the ‘Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives’ campaign intensifies the debate of the hypothesis; with the slogan intentionally prioritizing “simplicity and clarity”, this perceived non-negotiable qualitative testimony of the Downing Street communications director helps critique the state’s ability to engineer an uncritical media narrative (iNews 2026). Conversely, Gill and Logan’s (2022) *A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of COVID-19* utilizes qualitative linguistic analysis and a stark exposition of media content applying mass fear, which led to a general avoidance of healthcare, while also offering a distilled outlook on media as a significant contributor to public welfare and awareness. Ultimately, this study draws on qualitative data sources including UK government COVID-19 briefings and official campaign materials, alongside media reporting and relevant academic literature on crisis communication and media theory. Together, this study employs thematic and discourse analysis, further using framing analysis as an interpretive tool to examine narrative construction.

III. Results

Research extracted from (iNews, 2026) aligns with Entman’s framing paradigm, where the state utilizes the rule of three framework as a linguistic tool of selection and salience, transforming a political command into an absolute reality that creates an illusion of compliance; the resulting rhythmic structure reinforces the power of the state, stripping away any room for public debate or skepticism; Whereas the extract from (Gill and Lennon 2022) views media through the lens of Coombs' Crisis Communication Theory, a frame exposure which highlights a critical breakdown in the state's delivery of ethical instructions and adapting information. This is reinforced by the eruption of physical and mental public distress that pivoted journalism to expose state propaganda and failures to safeguard public well-being which strengthens validity for the opposing argument: media supporting the security and safety of the public during times of distress.

These observations indicate recurring patterns in crisis messaging, particularly the emphasis on simplicity, repetition, and emotional framing. The data suggests that communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic consistently structured information in ways that shaped public interpretation and behavioural response— a factor that can be correlated to other global colossal events reinforcing the assertion of media being a narrative tool used to construct any possible perspective.

IV. Analysis

Based on these findings, media narratives can be seen as a combination of both, where the boundary between the two will be blurred. In the case of COVID-19—primarily the goal was to achieve public stability and mitigate public panic, yet institutionalize state interest and communication control in order to frequently mediate the global scale of such events. Zooming in on the theoretical triad demonstrates how crisis communication does not function through isolated mechanisms, but through an interconnected system in which framing influences interpretation, agenda-setting influences attention, and crisis communication structures public trust and legitimacy. The patterns identified in the results section,

particularly the use of simplicity, repetition, and emotionally accessible messaging, can be interpreted as deliberate strategies shaped by the demands of crisis conditions. Simplified slogans such as those used during the COVID-19 pandemic reduce cognitive complexity, allowing rapid public understanding and widespread behavioural compliance. However, this simplification also has implications for how meaning is constructed. Repetition and clarity not only enhance accessibility but also limit interpretive space, reducing opportunities for alternative readings or public critique. This suggests that crisis communication operates through controlled narrative construction, where behavioural guidance is prioritised over informational complexity. These patterns indicate that media narratives in crisis situations shape both perception and response, influencing how individuals interpret risk, responsibility, and authority. However, it is important to recognise that these mechanisms do not operate solely as tools of institutional control. In crisis contexts, simplified and repeated messaging can be necessary to ensure public safety, particularly when rapid behavioural response is required at scale. The clarity of crisis communication can reduce misinformation, prevent confusion, and support collective action in high-risk situations. Therefore, while these narrative strategies may strengthen institutional authority, they can also function in the public interest by enabling coordinated responses and reducing uncertainty. The relationship between public stability and institutional self-interest is therefore not oppositional, but context-dependent and overlapping.

Overall, media narratives during periods of crisis blur the distinction between public welfare and institutional self-interest. While they are often presented as tools for public stability, the mechanisms through which this stability is achieved simultaneously reinforce institutional authority through framing, agenda-setting, and controlled crisis communication. As a result, media narratives function as both stabilising instruments and structures of influence, with their dominant effect depending on how crisis messaging is constructed and interpreted.

V. Conclusion

This study investigated the media's influence on the mass public and the control of its narrative under state authority during a time of crisis. The recurring use of language and symbolic undertones suggests a lack of neutrality—the global effect reinforcing how media actively shapes perception and behavioural responses, with emotional framing showcasing the significant impact of media narratives on human psychology regardless of who they predominantly benefit. Here, the evidence does not primarily point to one dominant argument; rather, the hypothesis is nuanced: the narrative exerts control over the public only in times of unified communication. As societies become increasingly dependent on digital communication networks, media narratives continue to play an expanding role in shaping public understanding of crises. The findings of this study extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how modern institutions rely on strategic communication to influence public perception, maintain trust, and coordinate collective action during periods of uncertainty. Ultimately, media narratives should not be understood as purely instruments of public welfare or purely mechanisms of institutional control. Rather, they operate within a complex intersection of both objectives, simultaneously shaping stability and reinforcing authority. As future crises continue to emerge within an increasingly interconnected media landscape, understanding how narratives are constructed, framed, and disseminated will remain essential to understanding the relationship between power, communication, and public trust.

VI. Improvements

This study is limited by its reliance on a singular case study of UK COVID-19 communication, which restricts the broader generalisability of its findings across different political systems and media environments. Future research could strengthen this analysis by incorporating comparative case studies across multiple countries or crisis events to assess whether similar narrative structures persist in different institutional contexts. Additionally, while this study employs qualitative discourse and framing analysis to interpret media narratives, incorporating mixed-method approaches, including quantitative content analysis, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the frequency and scale of specific communication patterns identified. This would allow for stronger empirical validation of the thematic patterns observed. Finally, further research could expand the scope of analysis to include digital and social media platforms, where narrative construction is often more fragmented, decentralised, and influenced by non-institutional individuals. This would provide a more complete picture of how media narratives operate in contemporary crisis environments.

VII. Evaluation

This study demonstrates that a theoretically driven qualitative approach is particularly effective in unpacking the complexity of crisis communication, where meaning is not fixed but constructed through language, framing, and institutional context. By grounding the analysis in established communication theories, the research is able to move beyond surface-level description and instead interpret how narrative structures actively shape public understanding during periods of uncertainty. A key strength of this approach lies in its ability to capture the layered and often implicit mechanisms through which media narratives operate, particularly in high-pressure environments such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study therefore succeeds in revealing not only what messages are communicated, but how their structure and repetition contribute to broader processes of perception and compliance. At the same time, the interpretive nature of qualitative discourse analysis means that findings are inherently contingent on theoretical framing and analytical perspective. However, rather than weakening the study, this highlights the extent to which meaning in crisis communication is itself constructed and open to interpretation, reinforcing the relevance of the methodological approach chosen. Overall, the research demonstrates strong conceptual alignment between question, theory, and analysis, allowing for a coherent and critically informed examination of media narratives under crisis conditions.

VIII. Works Cited

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