

Coronavirus Pandemic: How National Leaders Framed Their Speeches to Fellow Citizens

Asia Pacific Media Educator
1–17

© 2021 University of
Wollongong, Australia



Reprints and permissions:
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india
DOI: 10.1177/1326365X211048589
journals.sagepub.com/home/ame



Pradeep Krishnatray¹  and
Sangeeta Shrivastava²

Abstract

It has perhaps never happened before that presidents or prime ministers of almost all countries have spoken to their citizens in so short a time on the same topic—COVID-19. When the scientific community did not have correct answers or adequate explanations for the questions that people and patients were asking, world leaders took up the gauntlet and spoke to their citizens. What did they tell them? What facts did they choose to dwell on, and how did they present them? How did they provide comfort and support? What offer did they make? We selected the speeches of leaders from five countries with the highest (nominal) GDP—the USA, China, Japan, Germany and India, and analysed it using a qualitative method—framing analysis. All the speeches except that of China's were relatively short and contained four dominant frames: prevention-protection, the other, solidarity and hope and comfort. However, each leader's address had a unique frame. The manner in which the leaders framed their arguments and announcements shows how they understand and construct the identity of their fellow citizens.

Keywords

Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, framing analysis, leaders' speeches

It is perhaps the first time in recent memory that leaders of nations, big or small, have had to speak to their people on a public health issue at about the same time. The last time a public health emergency of a similar magnitude occurred, the

¹ Marketing School, ICAI University and formerly with Research and Strategic Planning, Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (JHUCCP), New Delhi, Delhi, India.

² Center for Research and Education (CREED), Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

Corresponding author:

Pradeep Krishnatray, Flat 001, Tower 5, Grand Forte Apts, SIGMA-IV, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201310, India.

E-mail: pradeepkrishnatray@gmail.com

world leaders lacked the means to talk directly to their citizens. The 1918 Spanish flu faced another big challenge. The world had yet to witness the antibiotic revolution. Nor it had the benefit of institutions such as WHO or CDC.

In 2020, the world has all of these and more. Yet we know but little about COVID-19. Epidemiologists have inferred that only about 2% die of it. However, individuals have no way of knowing whether they are part of that small risk group. We are more than 6 months into the Coronavirus pandemic, but doctors and specialists continue to speak in different voices. Some claimed, not long ago, that hydroxychloroquine is prophylactic. Others argued that it is not. Some said healthy people should wear masks. Others said it was not necessary. Then there were those who said once that masks were not necessary, but now say otherwise. With some, the mantra was, 'test, test, test'. Others did not agree. The ever-present media did not help either. It focussed on those 5% who were in hospital or had died; not on those 80% who had self-resolved. So far, messaging has been neither clear nor consistent. This has left many ordinary people confused.

The lack of credible and authoritative information about the pandemic is bad enough. What has added to public confusion though is the multiplicity of opinions and interpretations that health experts and virologists have regularly offered. People have yet to know how long uncertainty would last, what the future holds for them, and how they can mitigate the effect of social and economic disruption the virus has brought about. In such a bewildering situation, people have searched for answers and explanations. They have looked up to a person or source who can offer comfort and advice. Across the world, we have witnessed national leaders play that role. They have appeared on television and have spoken directly to their citizens. They have explained the risks due to the virus, proposed dramatic and unheard-of ways of controlling it and offered hope and confidence. How did they do it? What did they tell the people? Were they responsive to public opinion? What did they have to offer? We turned to their speeches to address these questions.

Literature Review

Our exposure to media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic leads us to assume that it was perhaps one issue where the media, public and executive agendas were almost similar for a certain period of time. Newspapers ran front-page news on the pandemic, television stations presented and debated the constantly developing COVID-19 story, the public curbed and altered its travel plans and schedules, and stayed indoors and governments organized daily press briefings to issue instructions and advisories regarding the pandemic to their citizens. On the other hand, the pandemic got presidents and prime ministers of countries to speak to their people and present a plan of action to deal with the situation prevailing in their country. Research has shown that news content with political import is 'indexed' to statements by official sources and more specifically the governing elites (Bennett et al., 2006). Specifically, researchers have shown that political actors can dominate the frame-building process by being one of the most important sources in news promoting their preferred frames (Bennett, 1996; Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld &

Sheafer, 2006). In the context of this study, this means that when the presidents and prime ministers of countries spoke to their people, they framed the pandemic for the media and public to discuss and debate. Our first research question, therefore, explores how national leaders framed the pandemic and its consequences.

The second research question flows from the first. Its rationale is that if leaders of different countries discuss the same topic (such as COVID-19) in their speeches, then those topics are likely important to society and its people. However, each country's experience is unique in some important ways and, therefore, each country's leader may assign a degree of salience to a part of the topic that may be unique to it. In other words, if several leaders speaking about COVID-19, in the same way, can show what they perceive is important to society, then several leaders speaking about COVID-19 in different ways can show what they perceive as important to them and to their people. Following this line of argument, this study attempted to explore whether there was congruence among the speeches that the national leaders delivered. That is, did the leaders frame their presentation similarly or was there any discernible difference in the frames they used?

We use framing theory to analyse the research questions. To be sure, scholars have conceptualized framing in a variety of ways. There are those who have demanded greater methodological rigour, clarity and precision to understand the mechanisms behind framing (Cacciatore et al., 2016). They recommended the abandonment of the general framing paradigm and instead focus on different types of framing, especially equivalence and emphasis framing. The former focusses on the manipulation of the presentation of logically equivalent information. Emphasis framing, on the other hand, focusses on the manipulation of the content of the communication. In our case, as indicated above, we attempt to analyse whether the leaders have emphasized different aspects of what is essentially the same story (content)—the pandemic. Moreover, if they have, how have they done it?

The second school of scholars have posited framing as a subset of agenda-setting (Melkote, 2009). Recent studies have not only corroborated the original concept that the media tell the public what to think about but have provided evidence that media also tell readers and viewers how they should think and feel about what they have been told to think about (Rill & Davis, 2008). The focus here is not on what media emphasize, but on how media describe an issue (Coleman & Banning, 2006). The emphasis on how to think and feel about (rather than what to think and feel about) has been called 'second-level' or 'attribute' agenda-setting. However, some argue otherwise and consider it as an independent field of study (Maher, 2001; Scheufele, 1999; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

The third group of scholars traces back to the beginnings of framing study to Goffman (1974), who suggested that people build broad schema to understand and interpret events and information. Goffman called this schema, 'primary frameworks'. These frameworks underpin the theory of framing. Using this approach, framing can be seen as placing information into 'interpretive packages' (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009) or sets of schema by which related concepts may be grouped together. Frames guide the recipients of the information towards the communicator's desired interpretation: 'At their most powerful, frames invite people to think about an issue in particular ways' (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

Speakers (or leaders) attempt to address or appeal to these interpretive packages in order to influence attitudes and actions.

Framing theory recognizes that audience interpret information in multiple ways. This largely depends on how the source presents the information and how the audience receive it. (Chong & Druckman, 2007). We use framing analysis because we believe that when the leaders (the source) addressed their citizens about coronavirus, they would have worked out what aspects of the pandemic they would speak on and how. Entman (1993) stated, 'to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'.

Entman's definition underlines three characteristics of framing. One, framing entails the selection of some aspects of perceived reality. Both opinion leaders and media do it every time they choose a part of the issue and put it in a specific context. Pan and Kosicki (1993) said that by placing information in a chosen context, certain elements of the issue get 'greater allocation of an individual's cognitive resources'. Two, the issue (or parts of it) gains salience when the opinion leaders use a variety of rhetorical or other devices to emphasize its importance or relevance. Some researchers have called this 'emphasis framing' (Druckman, 2001). That is, in choosing to highlight or elaborate a part of the issue, the leaders and media indicate its salience. Three, framing the issue in a specific way promotes a particular definition of a problem. A frame thus becomes 'a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue' (Gross, 2008).

Jacoby (2000) noted the role of political elites in framing an issue. He stated,

...issues arise from complex problems that are separate and remote from the direct experiences of most citizens (Cobb & Elder, 1983). Therefore, information about these problems must be communicated to and at least partially interpreted for the public, before an issue can truly be said to exist in the first place. Political elites usually have quite a bit of latitude in defining policy issues for the mass public. Therefore, they do so in ways that shine the best possible light on their own preferred courses of action.

Our enquiry into the framing of the leaders' speeches on the COVID-19 pandemic is based on two major aspects of Entman's definition. At one level, we seek to find out how the leaders made COVID-19 pandemic salient in their speech. For us, salience means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to audiences. Vatz (1973) made it clear that the way that the speaker chooses to relay the information at hand has a great deal to do with how the information is intended to be received, processed and acted upon by the audience.

The second aspect of Entman's definition relates to promoting the issue in such a manner as to communicate a certain point of view. Vatz (1973) noted that meaning is not intrinsic in events, facts, people or 'situations', nor are facts 'publicly observable'. Except for those situations that directly confront our own empirical reality, we learn of facts and events through someone communicating them to us.

This relates to telling the story in ways to make the audience think and feel about it in a certain manner. For our purpose, this means how the pandemic narrative was constructed, packaged and presented in speeches and how some attributes or aspects of the issue were made salient. The assumption we make here is that information packaging and presentation are major strategies for framing an issue. The way leaders organize, treat and present issues, events and objects, such as pandemic, offers interpretive frameworks for the audience to make sense of issues and events. Vatz (1973) noted, 'No situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it'. The speaker, Vatz said, chooses the meaning for the listener.

We were interested in finding out how national leaders packaged and presented COVID-19-related information to the public. Our secondary motivation was to find out how similar (or dissimilar) were Covid frames when leaders of the USA, China, Japan, Germany and India spoke on the same topic and the salience they assigned to the frames.

This led us to ask three specific questions:

- RQ1:** What frames do the national leaders use to construct the Coronavirus pandemic narrative?
- RQ2:** Was there any difference in the frames that national leaders use to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ3:** What aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic were ascribed most salient in leaders' speeches?

Methodology

Why did we choose to analyse the speeches? As indicated, this was perhaps the first time when leaders of almost all the nations spoke directly to their people in a relatively short span of time on a common issue—coronavirus outbreak. However, for this article, we have examined the speeches of top-five national leaders. These leaders not only represent more than half of the world's population, but they also lead economically powerful countries. They have, therefore, the potential to influence the policy pronouncements and practices of other nations and their leaders.

As indicated, the five countries are the most powerful, economically. The USA heads the list with a (nominal) GDP of over 21 trillion dollars. The second country, China, with GDP of over 14 trillion dollars, lags far behind the US. Japan comes third with a GDP of over 5 trillion dollars. Germany and India bring up the rear with nominal GDP close to 4 trillion and 3 trillion dollars, respectively (Silver, 2020).

Except for the USA, the leaders of other countries spoke in their native language. We, therefore, accessed and analysed the English versions of the speeches of the other four leaders. Apart from the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, the other leaders spoke for 20 minutes or less, and the print version of their speeches ran into 3–4 pages. The Chinese leader's speech was an exception in many ways. It ran into 12 pages and its leader did not directly address the people (via national telecast), but instead addressed the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of

the CPC Central Committee. More importantly, from the point of view of analysis, Xi Jinping delivered his speech on February 3, more than a month after the virus had broken in Wuhan, but much before WHO declared coronavirus a global pandemic. The other four speeches were delivered after the WHO declaration.

To begin with, we put a simple structure on the analysis. Given their purpose and duration, the speeches had to have a meaningful statement right at the beginning, a rather lengthy body with details on what leaders asked their citizens and communities to do (or not do), how their government intends to act and a powerful appeal towards the end. For the purpose of analysis, we considered the opening 5–6 sentences as the beginning and, similarly, the last 5–6 sentences as the end. We assumed that the beginning would contextualize the problem, present the belief and perception of the leader, or frame the challenge in a particular manner. We anticipated that the end would not only summarize the main points of the speech, but would also rally the people around the challenge the country faced. The middle – the body of the speech offered the leaders the opportunity to spell out their ideas in greater depth and detail, and propose a set of actions that would reduce the risk and harm of infection.

Method: Framing

As indicated, we used framing analysis to understand how the leaders packaged and presented their plans and ideas to the people. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) discussed two possible approaches for content analysing the (news) frames: inductive and deductive. In the inductive approach, the frames emerge out of data through a process of deletion, accretion and recombination, leading eventually to the formation of a parsimonious set of frames. For example, Lee (2018) used the inductive approach to dig out the frames four Republican presidents used in their discussions of warfare, defence and security. He identified three frames: ‘A better world’, ‘a great enemy’ and ‘a firm friend’. The deductive approach to framing, on the other hand, predetermines the set of frames before analysing the content and then verifies the extent of occurrence of these predetermined frames. One clear advantage of deductive framing is that it allows cross-national analyses of content to discover similarities and dissimilarities. However, the deductive approach can sometimes be problematic as it can ignore the existence of important frames.

We decided to use the inductive approach for a qualitative content analysis of framing of the COVID-19 pandemic by the five national leaders. An important consideration for choosing to use the inductive approach was the uniqueness of the situation in which a country found itself. We assumed that since the outbreak had unevenly affected the five countries, their citizens would react differently to it and so would their leaders.

We adapted the procedure outlined by Winett (1995) for conducting the content analysis. Two researchers independently coded the five speeches. To identify the frames, they read all the five speeches at least three times. After each reading, they shared their ideas and understanding of the content in order to achieve consensus. The first reading enabled them to make sense of the speeches. It gave a general idea about what the leaders spoke and how they represented the issues

surrounding coronavirus. The second reading enabled them to distance themselves from the content and read it from a third person's perspective. The third reading enabled them to group the emerging themes into categories. The categories emerged inductively. The initial list of categories was long and tentative, but similar categories were combined to arrive at a consolidated and parsimonious set of categories. Given the relatively short length of the speeches, it was not necessary to use any software for analysing the speech content, but we used qualitative software, Atlas.ti to generate a word count for each speech and find out the words most frequently used in the speeches. Prepositions and conjunctions were ignored.

During the second reading, each researcher recorded the arguments made in the speeches. After discussion, the researchers merged the arguments showing common features under a frame. In other words, a frame was a set of arguments that shared a common idea or theme. More often than not, they indicated explicitly or implicitly a point of view of the speaker. Often a single complete sentence represented an argument, and a set of inter-related arguments spread across the speech constituted a frame. For example, two arguments—'To keep new cases from entering our shores, we will be suspending all travel from Europe to the USA for the next 30 days'. and 'My administration is coordinating directly with communities with the largest outbreaks, and we have issued guidance on school closures, social distancing and reducing large gatherings'.—Can be grouped under the 'prevention' frame. Moreover, a frame included not just a series of arguments that share a common perspective of the problem, but also a set of catch-phrases and visual images that can be readily identified as being a part of that frame. For example, catch phrases such as 'We are all in this together', 'if all of us join forces', 'Everyone counts' suggest a 'solidarity' frame.

The researchers carried out the third reading to check the correctness and exhaustiveness of these frames. After the list of frames was identified, we conducted an in-depth analysis of all the speeches and identified the dominant frames; that is, those frames that included maximum arguments.

Analysis

The President of the USA, Donald Trump, spoke to the nation from his Oval Office on 11 March 2020—the day WHO announced that COVID-19 was a global pandemic (see Table 1). The same day, he announced a suspension of travel from Europe for 30 days. The President of China, Xi Jinping, did not address the nation. Instead, on 3 February 2020, he delivered a speech at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CPC Central Committee and presented a contingency plan to tackle the new 'coronavirus pneumonia'. He spoke more than a month after the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan. The Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, made an opening statement at the press conference regarding the declaration of a state of emergency in the country on 7 April 2020. The Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, made a rare appearance on television and appealed to citizens to help each other and maintain discipline. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, addressed the nation on television on 24 March 2020, on 'vital

Table I. Details of Leaders' Speeches

Country	Leader	Speech Delivered on (year 2020)	Number of Words (approx.)	Language Used
USA	President Donald Trump	11 March	1,300 ¹	English
China	President Xi Jinping	3 February	4,300 ²	Mandarin
Japan	Prime Minister Shinzo Abe	7 April	2,700 ³	Japanese
Germany	Chancellor Angela Merkel	18 March	1,700 ⁴	German
India	Prime Minister Narendra Modi	24 March	1,800 ⁵	Hindi

Source: ¹The New York Times (2020). ²Jinping (2020). ³Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet (2020). ⁴General Anzeiger (2020). ⁵PIB (2020).

aspects relating to the menace of COVID-19'. Earlier, on 19 March 2020, he spoke to the nation on combating COVID-19 in which he had asked Indians to observe a 14-hour voluntary 'people's (Janata) curfew' three days later and express their gratitude to all those who were 'selflessly' serving others.

Except Xi Jinping, the other leaders spoke for 20 minutes or less. Their speeches had four dominant frames. We describe each of them first. We end the analysis section by discussing briefly other frames that were unique in the speeches.

The *protection-prevention* frame was the most dominant in all the speeches. It covers more than half of the body of the presentations. President Trump listed several concrete steps his government has taken to prevent the spread of the virus and protect Americans from economic distress. Specifically, the steps related to travel, monitoring the situation in China and South Korea, health insurance, tax payments, capital and liquidity support to affected firms, cutting red tape and making therapies and drugs available and signing into law a funding bill of over US\$8 billion. At the end of several of the measures, he assured the Americans, '...these treatments will significantly reduce the impact and reach of the virus... I will always put the well-being of America first'.

The Chinese President expanded the scope of the frame to include the idea of control in it. He emphasized that *prevention and control* of the epidemic was not just a medical and health issue, but an all-round work. 'It is an overall battle', Xi Jinping said. The frame included strengthening the control of party officials and functionaries, and adherence to the 'national chess plan'. He stressed the need for close tracking, timely analysis and quick action. He recommended the adoption of the 'Xiaotangshan'¹ model of treatment to reduce the infection rate and mortality due to the virus. The Chinese president referred to 'prevention' and 'control' of coronavirus 62 and 67 times, respectively

The Japanese Prime Minister used the *protection frame* to shield against loss of life and livelihood. It consisted of two sub-categories. The first dealt with the consequences if life were to go on as usual, in which the prime minister predicted that 80,000 people would be infected. He proposed a 3Cs avoidance strategy to

save lives—avoid closed spaces, crowded spaces and close-contact settings. Using the argument of increasing strain on the healthcare system and the looming threat of nationwide spread of the virus, he declared a state of emergency in parts of the country. The second category of the frame promised protection against the economic loss that several sectors would suffer because of the virus. Not only did the prime minister reel out numbers to protect employment and businesses, but also claimed that the level of economic support his government was providing was ‘one of the largest in the world... raise(s) the subsidy rate to the highest level ever in history’.

The German Chancellor imbued the protection frame with empathy and understanding. It reflected care and concern, but unlike the USA and Japan leaders, did not refer to any economic or financial allocation. The chancellor said she realizes the dramatic changes the virus was imposing on people’s lifestyles. She counselled them to tend to the old, take care of neighbours and near and dear ones. ‘No one is expendable. Everyone counts, it takes all our efforts’, she said sympathetically. Underlining the need for social distancing for protection, she explained that distance is the only way to express caring.

Prime Minister Modi used the *protection frame* in an entirely different manner. Like other leaders, he emphasized the importance of social distancing, and reinforced it by stating, ‘There is no other way to escape Coronavirus’. The prime minister then announced the imposition of complete lockdown for 21 days. He said,

In order to protect the country, and each of its citizens, from midnight tonight, a complete ban is being imposed on people from stepping out of their homes... It is impossible to even estimate the price India will have to pay if such carelessness continues.

In other words, the Indian prime minister not only stressed upon the protection and safety, but also dropped a direct and overt warning about the risks and dangers if people were careless and casual. He warned that if the 21-day lockdown is breached, ‘the country and your family could be set back 21 years’, underscoring the need for strict observance. During the entire speech, Modi repeated a single message—stay at home, 12 times (‘do just one thing—stay inside your home’) for 21 days (which he repeats eight times).

The ‘other’ is the second frame evident in the speeches. The leaders projected it as an adversary. Trump brought up China five times in his speech—the first time in the very first sentence, he spoke when he blamed it for spreading Coronavirus throughout the world. Similarly, he referred to Europe seven times to either demonstrate that his actions have produced results better than in Europe or to hold it responsible for failing to restrict travel from China and ‘seeding’ a large number of new clusters in the USA. No other national leader brought up a country as many times as Trump brought up China and Europe. However, all leaders were united in projecting the virus as an adversary. Some, like India, brought it up to describe its grim consequences (‘If we are not able to manage these 21 days, the country and your family could be set back 21 years’). Some, like the USA, invoked the war metaphor to ‘combat’ and ‘defeat’ it; for others, it was an ‘invisible enemy’. For Japan and Germany, the other was not only an adversary, but also a grave reminder of a historical event that has scarred their collective memory.

To the Japanese, such an event was the ‘Great East Japan Earthquake’ that President Abe recalled. The German Chancellor compared the challenge the pandemic posed to what the country had to bear during the Second World War. For all the leaders, though, the virus had grievously harmed lives, lifestyle and economy.

Solidarity was the third overarching frame present in all the speeches. Expressed in different ways, the notion of joining hands to beat the pandemic rings in all the speeches. The Chinese president emphasized the need to strengthen unified organizational leadership so that it can fight the disease effectively. The American president gave solidarity a political twist when he called out to put politics aside, stop the partisanship and band together. He presented the crisis as a ‘temporary moment in time’ that the nation and world could resolve by coming together. The German Chancellor took a different tack. Her solidarity pitch was more people-centric. She included them by inserting ‘we’ in her speech:

We will succeed in this task if all citizens see it as their task... We must limit the risk of one infecting the other as much as we can ... we can protect and strengthen each other by acting together.

Towards the end of their speeches, the leaders reassured their citizens in different ways. Their message was uplifting and intended to infuse *hope and confidence* in times of uncertainty. The US president comforted the citizens by saying, ‘...we will heal the sick, care for those in need, help our fellow citizens and emerge from this challenge stronger and more unified than ever before’. Speaking to the CPC, the Chinese president advised its cadre not to burden the grassroots workers. He said, ‘Let grassroots cadres devote more energy to the front line of epidemic prevention and control’. The Japanese prime minister reminded his citizens about the spirit of helping one another when the earthquake struck the nation nine years ago. He recognized people standing up to do whatever they can amidst the pandemic. ‘This is our hope’, he said, and added ‘...if all of us join forces, we are able to move forward once again with hope’. The German chancellor wrapped up her speech by focussing on saving lives and this, she said, depended on ‘each individual and therefore on all of us’. The Indian prime minister summarized his speech by reiterating that Indians will abide by the ‘instructions of the Government and local authorities’, and combat the difficult situation to emerge victorious.

In addition to four common themes or frames in the leaders’ speeches, we found one unique frame in each of the five speeches. We briefly highlight them. President Trump’s speech was scattered with notions of national pride or effusive self-congratulation. The ‘America, Best’ frame reverberated at different places in his speech. At one place, he said, ‘we have the best economy, the most advanced health care and the most talented doctors, scientists and researchers anywhere in the world’. He claimed that this greatness is due to the economic policies, ‘we have put into place over the last three years’. The next few weeks would show that despite the most advanced care, the country suffered an unusually high number of deaths because of the pandemic.

The Chinese president avoided using superlatives, but was unequivocal about his expectations from the party workers. The *leadership and communication* frame enjoined party committees and governments at all levels to two tasks. One,

they must ‘resolutely obey’ the Party Central Committee’s unified command. Two, they must let the masses and the world know what the government is doing to ‘incorporate more warm colours into the current public opinion and create a strong atmosphere where the wind and rain can go forward without hindrance’. When occasion demanded, the Chinese president was not averse to using flowery language.

The Japanese prime minister began his speech by thanking doctors and health staff who have saved lives. The *gratitude frame*, however, went beyond acknowledging their role. The prime minister promised that he would do everything possible to support the medical and health staff, reduce the risk of infection, protect the workplace of medical facilities, increase domestic production of medical supplies, strengthen the supply system and free up medical institutions by shifting patients to lodges and hotels.

Chancellor Merkel invoked the *discipline frame* to remind people that Germany is an ‘open democracy’ and appealed to them to show ‘discipline and follow rules’. She conceded that the restrictions imposed on their movement are of a kind that has never been imposed in the country before, and they ‘interfere with our lives and also with our democratic self-image’. She brought up the word ‘democracy’ four times in her speech and on another occasion when she used it she said that in a democracy, the restrictions should ‘never be decided lightly and only temporarily—but at the moment they are indispensable to save lives’.

The *helping hand* is a minor but significant frame in Prime Minister Modi’s speech. Unlike his US and Japanese counterpart, Modi did not spell out the economic relief package in detail, but shared the quantum of support his government plans to offer—₹150 billion, for treating coronavirus patients and strengthening the medical infrastructure of the country. In the broad context of the speech, the large amount is apparently an indication that the government is doing all it can to extend relief. The prime minister recognized the support the private sector and private labs and hospitals have offered during the pandemic.

How did the leaders end their speech? How did they sign off? President Trump invoked God (‘God bless you, and God bless America’). The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, concluded with a thinly veiled warning to the party workers (‘cadres who do not act or act indiscriminately ... should be held accountable in a timely manner’). Prime Minister Abe ended his speech with confidence (‘We can absolutely prevail in our battle with the virus and overcome this ordeal of emergency’). Chancellor Merkel ended on a personal note (‘Take good care of yourself and your loved ones. I thank you’). Prime Minister Modi did the same (‘I am confident that every Indian will not only combat this difficult situation successfully but also emerge victorious. Take care of yourself and your loved ones’).

Conclusion

It is difficult to think of a time when so many presidents and prime ministers of countries have spoken on the same issue in so short a time. Coronavirus compelled them to do so. As it happened, the speeches were relatively short,

contextual and confined to events unfolding in the country. This article chose the speech of five leaders whose countries have the highest GDP. The countries were USA, China, Japan, Germany and India. We qualitatively examined the speech of each national leader and derived underlying themes, which we called frames. For the purpose of analysis, we considered a frame to be a set of statements characterized by a dominant theme. The frames were often self-evident, but were sometimes implicit in the statements made.

The opening sentence of Trump's speech referred to the 'nation's unprecedented response to the coronavirus outbreak'. In the same sentence, he identified China as the place where the virus originated and then spread to other countries. Later, he again brought up the origin of the virus and termed it a 'foreign virus'. By juxtaposing the speed and scale of response to an 'unforeseen challenge' with a clearly identifiable country of origin of it, the president was repackaging his old theme of China-bashing and projecting it to a new domain—public health. In this way, his speech was different from the speeches delivered by the other four leaders. President Xi Jinping opened his speech with a rather long statement tracing all that he did from the outbreak of 'new coronavirus pneumonia in Wuhan on January 7'. Attempting to blunt the criticism that he was slow to respond, he said, 'From the first day of the year to the present, epidemic prevention and control is my most concerned issue'.

Unlike President Trump's aggressive posturing and President Xi's detailed opening statement, Prime Minister Abe's speech made a sober beginning. Speaking on behalf of the Japanese people, he thanked doctors, nurses and others for their 'dedicated efforts' to save lives. The German Chancellor, not known for making television appearances often began by acknowledging that the coronavirus is changing life dramatically. She then described how the virus has disturbed the daily rhythm of life where people cannot go to work, children cannot go to school, theatres and cinemas and shops are closed. She said, 'We all miss the human encounters that are otherwise taken for granted'. In describing the hardship right at the beginning, she communicated her awareness about what is happening in the country. The Prime Minister of India began his speech by congratulating the people of India for having made the March 22 'people's curfew' a success and demonstrating to the world that in times of crisis, every Indian comes together to overcome it. Later, he asked his audience to be thankful to a range of people who continue to work despite the risk to their lives.

Despite different ways of beginning their address, there were several common themes in the five speeches delivered. As indicated, they all focussed only on one topic: The occurrence of coronavirus in their country and the rapid rate of infection. In almost all cases, the leaders spoke about what is happening in their countries, their expectations of their citizens, what their government is doing and intends to do for individuals, families and businesses. The leaders' speeches were devoid of jargon, their explanations were easy to understand, and they focussed not on the virus or pandemic, but its human and economic consequences. They all spoke about protection, prevention and solidarity. They raised concerns, not anxieties; they spoke to their citizens but appealed to their humanity. They excelled in the art and skill of translational communication.

We measured the extent to which the leaders attempted to establish rapport or fellow feeling with their citizens. We calculated the Affinity percentage or quotient by dividing the number of times the leaders used the expression ‘We’ in their speech with the total number of words spoken. Table 2 shows that the German Chancellor Angela Merkel had the highest percentage of affinity among the five leaders, indicating that the character of her speech tended to be more empathic than other leaders.

It is also interesting to observe the number of times coronavirus (or simply the virus) was referred to in the speeches. Table 2 shows that the five leaders chose to prioritize affinity over coronavirus. Reference to the virus came up specifically in three contexts. The economic and social disruption or harm it was causing; the importance and urgency to protect the society from its grim or tragic consequences; and the resolve to combat it together.

Each leader recognized the role of a range of professionals and workers who were saving lives, sometimes putting their own at risk. Each speaker advised their citizens to practice social distancing and announced their decision to impose restrictions on movement, schools, entertainment and others forms of everyday activity. They said they were doing so to arrest the spread of infection and save lives. Finally, leaders from the USA, Japan and India announced a set of measures to relieve the hardship and economic distress their fellow citizens are facing or would face.

However, a close reading of the speeches revealed differences as well. The differences lay in the way the leaders opened and ended their speech, and the salience they ascribed to the frames (see Table 3). The US President prioritized the ‘other’—China and Europe over other frames. He also spelt out in detail the economic and financial allocations for businesses and other groups of people. The Chinese president warned about punitive action. No other leader did so. He ascribed salience to obeying the unified command, a euphuism for party leadership and the government. Although he declared an emergency in the country, the Japanese prime minister ascribed greater salience to the role of the medical and health fraternity and called for self-restrain. The German Chancellor began matter-of-factly by discussing the changes that the virus has brought about, but emphasized discipline and democratic norms. On the other hand, the Indian Prime Minister spoke about a ‘complete lockdown’ and asked people to abide by

Table 2. The Affinity Quotient

Country	Number of times ‘WE’ used	Total Number of Words Spoken	Affinity Percentage	Virus Percentage
USA	32	1,300	2.46	1.38
China	21	4,300	0.49	0.12
Japan	61	2,700	2.26	0.26
Germany	47	1,700	2.76	0.48
India	18	1,800	1.0	0.67

Source: The authors.

Note: Higher percentage indicates greater affinity or higher reference to the virus.

Table 3. Major Issues Dealt with in Leaders' Speeches

Parameter	Countries			
	USA	China	Japan	India
Salience ascribed	'The other' Financial support	Unified command government Follow leadership, government authority Party	Self-restrain	Complete lockdown
Safety measure announcement	Stay home	Government authority	Declaration of emergency	Abide by government instructions
Appeal to higher order	God	Government Party	None (self-restraint)	Government rules
Comparison with	China Europe	None	Great East Japan earthquake	Developed countries
Reference to China	Yes	NA	None	Yes
Reference to rumour/ misinformation	None	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economic support announced in speech	Additional US\$50 billion SBA low-interest loans; defer tax payments; provide > US\$200 billion of additional liquidity to economy	Brief None	Brief 108 trillion yen; >6 trillion yen cash to families, businesses. 300,000 yen per household; additional 10,000 yen per child	Brief ₹ 150 billion

Source: The authors.

‘government instructions’. No other leader was so direct in emphasizing the need for lockdown as Modi was. He also was loud in warning people about the near-catastrophic impact of violating the lockdown. In doing so, he imparted most salience to the prevention–protection frame.

The manner in which the leaders framed their arguments and announcements showed how they understand and construct the identity of their fellow citizens. Prime Minister Modi advised and warned people of the threat from a virus that many Indians could not fathom what it would be. He stressed the need for ‘complete lockdown’ because anything less would not stop the spread of infection among the country’s vast population. On the other hand, President Xi Jinping’s long address subjected his audience to a one-way monologue. President Trump’s ‘America Best’ frame was an extension of the ‘America First’ theme he has often employed in public discourse. President Abe, in keeping with the Japanese tradition, virtually bowed to those who have saved lives. Unlike Modi and Trump, the Japanese and German leaders were subdued in their expression and gentle in their pronouncements.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Pradeep Krishnatray  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1859-3839>

Note

1. Xiaotangshan is a small town outside Beijing; it shot to prominence in 2003 when the government hastily built a 1,000-bed field hospital during the SARS outbreak.

References

- Bennett, L. W. (1996). *News: The politics of illusion*. Longman.
- Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. G., & Livingston, S. (2006). None dare call it torture: Indexing and the limits of press independence in the Abu Ghraib scandal. *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 467–485.
- Cacciatore, M. A., Scheufele, D. A., & Iyengar, S. (2016). The end of framing as we know it ... and the future of media effects. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1068811>
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103–126.
- Cobb, R. W., & Elder, C. D. (1983). *Participation in American politics: The dynamics of Agenda-Building*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Coleman, R. & Banning, S. (2006). Network TV news’ affective framing of the presidential candidates: Evidence for a second-level agenda-setting effect through visual framing. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(2), 313–328.

- Druckman, J. N. (2001). The implications of framing effects for citizen competence. *Political Behavior*, 23(2), 225–256.
- Entman, R. M. (1993, December 1). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Entman, R. M. (2004). *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and U.S. foreign policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- General Anzeiger. (2020). *Angela Merkel's speech about the Coronavirus*. https://www.general-anzeiger-bonn.de/ga-english/news/angela-merkel-s-speech-about-the-coronavirus-in-full_aid-49639811
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Gross, K. (2008). Framing persuasive appeals: Episodic and thematic framing, emotional response, and policy opinion. *Political Psychology*, 29(2), 169–192.
- Jacoby, W. G. (2000). Issue framing and public opinion on government spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44(4), 750–767.
- Jinping, X. (2020). *Speech during the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee to study the response to the novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic*. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-02/15/c_1125572832.htm
- Lee, P. (2018). *The Words of war: A content analysis of republican presidential speeches from Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon, George W. Bush, and Donald J. Trump* (Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper No. 3400). <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3400>
- Maher, T. M. (2001). Framing: An emerging paradigm or a phase of agenda setting. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on 96 media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 83–94). Routledge.
- Melkote, S. (2009). News framing during a time of impending war: An examination of coverage in *The New York Times* prior to the 2003 Iraq war. *International Communication Gazette*, 71, 547–559.
- Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M. (1993, January). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication*, 10, 55–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1993.9962963>
- PIB. (2020). *Text of PM's address to the nation on vital aspects relating to the menace of COVID-19*. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1607995>
- Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. (2020). *Press conference by the prime minister regarding the declaration of a state of emergency*. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202004/_00001.html
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999, Winter). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 103–122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x>
- Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2000) Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 93–109.
- Silver, C. (2020). *The top 25 economies in the world*. <https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>
- Tewksbury, D., & Scheufele, D. A. (2009). News framing theory and research. In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 17–33). Routledge.
- The New York Times*. (2020). *President Trump speech on Coronavirus* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-speech.html>
- Vatz, R. E. (1973). The myth of the rhetorical situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6(3), 154–161.
- Winett, L. (1995). *Advocate's guide to developing framing memos*. Berkeley Media Studies Group.
- Wolfsfeld, G., & Sheaffer, T. (2006). Competing actors and the construction of political news: The contest over waves in Israel. *Political Communication*, 23(3), 333–354.

Authors' bio-sketches

Pradeep Krishnatray is currently at Marketing School of ICFAI University and was formerly with Research and Strategic Planning of Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (JHUCCP) in New Delhi, India.

Sangeeta Shrivastava is at Center for Research and Education (CREED) in Hyderabad, Telangana in India.