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### Examining media content: A case study of newspaper coverage of dowry in India, 1999-2006

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## GENERAL ARTICLE

# Examining media content: a case study of newspaper coverage of dowry in India, 1999–2006

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This study employs three methods to understand media content. First, the study examines the ‘peak periods’ to ascertain the pattern of coverage. Second, with a sample of 4058 articles the study examines the prominent frames used by newspapers. Third, with the help of interviews of journalists from the same newspapers, the study examines the factors that influence the way these frames are created in the first place. Results show that, in general, the driving force of this coverage is marketability of the stories. This is implied by the overall coverage as well as the responses of journalists.

**Keywords:** media content; frames; journalists’ frames; peak periods; dowry

### Introduction

Scholars have often emphasized the significance of analyzing media content. Media content is not only the most important component of the mass communication process, the ‘basis of media impact’ (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 27), but also the most visible part of the communication process that can help us understand less visible phenomena like the people involved in producing the content. Despite innumerable content analyses and framing analysis of media content, few studies exist that have examined the phenomena behind the production of news. This study attempts to understand media content using three methods. First, the study examines the ‘peak periods’ to ascertain the pattern of coverage. Second, it examines the prominent frames used by newspapers to interpret the issue. Third, with the help of interviews of journalists from the same newspapers, the study seeks to examine ‘frame sponsorship’ or what factors influence the way these frames are created in the first place.

An issue relevant for investigating the processes behind the journalists’ frames called for something more than everyday news. Prior research has shown that factors such as organizational pressures and constraints, social norms, journalistic routines, pressures of interest groups, and the ideological and political orientations of journalists could influence how journalists cover an issue (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978; and others). However, an issue that could highlight the normative responsibilities of journalists would help in understanding the forces beyond the day-to-day reporting of news. Scholars have developed a framework for examining the coverage of news with an ethical dimension. The significant components of such coverage deal with how thoroughly the issue is covered; highlighting the individual, institutional, professional, social, and legal dimensions of the

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issue (Craig, 1999). The normative expectations of this framework are similar to components in the social responsibility and communitarian press theory. Here the emphasis is not merely on reporting events but also serving society (Craig, 2003; Rivers, Schramm, & Christians, 1980; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963).

One such issue is the coverage of domestic violence fatalities. A 2005 World Health Organization report finds that domestic violence is the most common form of violence in women's lives worldwide (WHO, 2005). In the USA, every year hundreds of women are killed by their current or former partner (Bullock, 2007). In some parts of India, the traditional practice of 'dowry,' which literally means the gifts that a bride's parents give during her wedding, can lead to cases of domestic violence.

### ***Dowry: a short background***

'Number of dowry cases goes up' (*The Hindu*, 18 January 2008); 'Harassed for dowry, teacher ends life' (*The Indian Express*, 29 November 2007); 'Dowry death after love marriage' (*The Times of India*, 12 April 2008). These are headlines from three of India's premier newspapers that show the prevalence of dowry in modern India and its consequences. Since India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947, the country has seen gradual changes with respect to how it perceives the role of women in society. Many widespread social practices like 'sati' (where a woman self-immolates or is made to burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre as a gesture of fidelity and loyalty) and the 'purdah' system (where women are made to cover themselves completely to indicate modesty) have been almost completely eradicated. However, the deplorable practice of dowry (paid in cash or kind by the bride's family to the groom's) is still prevalent in a number of Indian states. Dowry is still given and taken not only by the illiterate section of the population, but also by the educated elites in India's metropolitan areas. Dowry is not restricted to any one religion; though historically, dowry has been 'an integral and institutionalized part of the Hindu marriage system' (Sheel, 1999, p. 17). It seems to be pervading all spheres of life irrespective of religion, caste, or economic and social backgrounds.

Almost two millennia ago, 'The Laws of Manu' (200 AD) described dowry as 'streedhan,' the gifts that a bride gets from her home (Oldenburg 2002). It was a form of inheritance for women. Dowry was supposed to be the security that a woman carries with her in case of any misfortune that might befall her husband's house. Over time, this voluntary practice became life-threatening to those it is meant to benefit the most. As Oldenburg (2003) points out: 'making dowry demands is a cultural oxymoron that bears no resemblance to the historical meaning of this institution.'

The historical origins of the modern dowry system in India can be traced back to the 1800s, when dowry meant a collection of clothes, household items, furniture, and cattle voluntarily given to the bride by her father at the time of marriage. These items were collected over time, and family and neighbors made contributions to it. Dowry was, therefore, originally not a burden on the father of the bride. 'There is no evidence in this period that the groom's family either bargained for a dowry or made dowry demands; it is emphatically seen as a matter of honor for the groom's side to accept what is given as dowry to the bride' (Oldenburg, 2002, p. 98).

Oldenburg (2002) traced the roots of the dowry system to the days of British rule. Part of the 'civilizing missions' of the British included agricultural taxes to be paid by farmers, effectively increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. There was a slow transformation of the peasant economy to a market and capitalist one. Dowry was one

of the casualties of this change (Oldenburg, 2002). Parents were eager to marry their daughters off to richer families, and the bridegrooms' families took advantage of this. The voluntary element in dowry was replaced by an obligation on the part of the bride's father to please the bridegroom's family. The bride's family thus became vulnerable to the demands of the bridegroom (Chirmade, 1992).

However, there are other scholars (i.e., Mandelbaum, 1999) who speculate that the shift in the dowry system might have arrived even before British rule, when Hindu parents were eager to protect their daughters from Muslim invaders. The shift in the dowry system from a voluntary and customary ritual to a modern socio-cultural evil has been the subject of many studies. Sheel (1999), in her extensive study on the roots of the practice, concludes that: 'Dowry, in its historical context, may thus be more appropriately viewed as arising from both compensation to a girl in lieu of the full right of inheritance and from hypergamy to maintain or provide a desired social status' (p. 27).

There are two major positions of women activists on the issue of dowry (Sheel, 1999). Madhu Kishwar, editor of the women's magazine *Manushi*, argues that dowry is the result of inheritance rights. 'In contemporary debates, dowry has been explained in the context of the asymmetrical relation between bride-givers and bride-takers as well as women's resourcelessness and lack of inheritance rights' (Sheel, 1999, p. 137). Activists like Omvedt, Parliwala, and Kelkar explain dowry in the context of 'the changing caste structure within a capitalist economy and of material production' (Sheel, 1999, p. 137).

One of the most common justifications for dowry is that a daughter does not get any share of her father's property so, in her marriage, she gets gifts in cash and kind, as a compensatory tactic. When the Hindu Succession Act came into effect in 1956, the Hindu daughter earned the right to inherit from her father (Beri, 1988). In practice, however, this is rarely seen. Though dowry is thought to be a form of female inheritance, a bride does not have any real control over the use of this property. As Stone and James (1995) mention in their study, Miller (1981) and Sharma (1984) have

convincingly shown that whereas this may be true in many parts of the world, in India dowry is property which passes from the bride's family to that of the groom, and that even if perceived to be 'women's property' (streedhan) by some Indians themselves, in fact a bride does not have (and historically never had) genuine control over the use and distribution of this property (p. 126).

Women in the dowry system can be seen as the 'vehicles of property transmission' and not as inheritors. In this context, women have no control over property or marriage arrangements but suffer harassment, physical abuse, and even death in their roles as bringers of dowry (Stone & James, 1995).

The social and cultural effects of dowry are many and devastating. Even after the initial dowry by the bride's father, in most cases, the bride is tortured mentally and physically for more dowry after marriage. In many cases, this torture leads to the murder or suicide of the bride (Chirmade, 1992). The dowry system reduces the woman to a commodity. Children born in such unhealthy conditions can be affected adversely. Apart from other cultural issues, it is also because of the dowry system that a girl child is considered a parental liability, thus resulting in the rise of female infanticide (Krishnamurthy, 1981).

Historically, dowry has been linked to the economic conditions of the people, and in its present form, it has been completely commercialized. As India modernized, dowry became an instrument to make money for the upwardly-mobile class. Today, dowry not only means gold, clothes, and utensils, but also consumer items like cars, refrigerators, furniture, washing machines, television sets, and sometimes even money for the groom to study

abroad. The marriage depends on the money and gifts the bride's family is able to pay. In most cases, the profession of the groom determines the amount of dowry. An Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer would normally get the highest rate, followed by doctors, engineers, and other professionals. Dowry has thus become a status symbol. During the marriage ceremony, articles comprising the dowry are displayed in the wedding hall.

The problem, however, does not stop at the demand for dowry. After the marriage, there are numerous ceremonies and rituals when dowry is demanded again in the form of gifts or money. In fact, it is a life-long struggle for the woman to keep her in-laws and husband happy by bringing money from her parents. When the dowry amount is not considered sufficient, the bride is often harassed and abused. This abuse could worsen to the point when the husband or his family kills the bride, often burning her, which are reported as accidents in the kitchen or as suicides.

In general, the number of dowry-related deaths over the years is increasing. In 1988, 2209 women were killed in dowry-related incidents. In 1996, the figure rose to 5513; in 2001, as many as 6851 dowry-related deaths were reported; and in 2004, the figure rose to 7026 deaths. In 2005, there was slight decrease in the number with 6787 dowry deaths (National Crime Records Bureau, 2007). It is possible dowry-related death cases are reported more often in recent years. Yet, these numbers are thought to be conservative as many cases still go unreported. Despite the existence of the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act and the rigorous laws to prevent dowry deaths under the 1986 constitutional amendments, convictions are rare.

### *Dowry-related crimes*

Dowry murders attracted the attention of women's organizations in the late 1970s that sparked nationwide protests. By 1979, one of the first cases of dowry-related deaths became the subject of serious press coverage. This was the case of Tarvinder Kaur, a 24-year-old new bride from New Delhi. In her dying declaration, Tarvinder stated that her mother-in-law and sister-in-law set her on fire. However, the police registered her death as a case of suicide. Women's groups, angered by this blatant police ineptitude, staged a massive demonstration. This act of protest is said to have launched the women's campaign against dowry in India (Gandhi & Shah, 1992).

In the legal battle over dowry, the murder of 19-year-old Sudha Goel was a significant marker. It was the first case in which the accused (Sudha's husband, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law) were sentenced to death by the trial court in 1985. Though the Indian Supreme Court later reduced the sentence to life imprisonment, the case triggered important constitutional amendments to the existing dowry laws. Another significant dowry-related murder case is that of Tripti Sharma, an employee in the Ministry of Defense, who was burned to death by her husband and his family in 1986. Despite strong evidence, the accused were acquitted, having convinced the jury that Tripti had committed suicide due to mental illness and depression (Jethmalani, 1995).

The persistence of dowry in India is not only because of the difficulty in enforcing the law or the pressures from the groom's family, but also because the bride's family continues to sustain it. In spite of the widespread awareness of the consequences of dowry, it is believed to be a way of buying happiness for the bride (Stone & James, 1995). A study done by Rao and Rao in 1980 examined students' expectations of dowry for persons of different educational backgrounds. Though the majority of the students considered the practice as 'evil' and 'unimportant for a marriage,' most of the respondents' brothers received dowry

or gave dowry for their sister's marriages (Rao & Rao, 1980). The continuing prevalence of dowry has been related to the sheer commercialization of marriages. There is a positive correlation between a man's education and status to the dowry his family demands. As a groom's educational experience increases, the dowry demanded for the marriage also increases (Rao & Rao, 1980).

In order to have a more focused view of what women themselves think about dowry, Krishnaswamy (1995) conducted a study to learn about the attitude of educated and employed Hindu married and unmarried women. The unmarried educated women were found to be more favorable toward dowry, which might be an indication of the growing materialism among the younger generation: 'one should buy the best things available and affordable to enjoy life even if that thing happens to be one's bridegroom' (Krishnaswamy, 1995, p. 39). Under these circumstances, the story of Nisha Sharma made headlines in May 2003, when she handed her would-be husband over to the police on their wedding day for demanding more dowry. Nisha Sharma attained celebrity status overnight and media coverage of dowry intensified.

### *Dowry in the media*

Dowry-inspired murder cases received immense media coverage from the late 1970s to the early 1980s mainly because of the active role played by women's organizations. They brought to light many dowry-related murder cases in strong anti-dowry campaigns. Joseph and Sharma (1994) point out that: 'These incidents marked the beginning of a change in media coverage of this issue which till then had consisted of small items routinely reporting these deaths on the city page' (p. 34). A study done on the coverage during this period (1979–1984) reveals the impact of the women's movement on the media. They concluded there was a noticeable improvement in the coverage of dowry in the national papers, although the coverage in regional papers remained unchanged.

Prasad (1994) used content analysis to examine the characteristics of dowry-related newspaper stories. She used the data to determine the frequency and uniformity of certain characteristics in dowry-related deaths or abuses. Three major characteristics that emerged from the study were: the victim is a young woman in her twenties, not well educated, and completely dependent on her husband or his relatives. In more than 80% of these cases, the end was death (Prasad, 1994).

In the last two decades, dowry-related murder cases came to be more frequently reported (Garg, 1990). A national survey conducted by the All India Democratic Women's Association in 2002 reveals that the practice is widespread and has permeated every section of society (Rajalakshmi, 2004). In the 1980s, the media coverage of dowry was triggered by the anti-dowry campaigns of women's organizations, while in 2003 it was the case of Nisha Sharma. The present study uses content analysis and interviews with journalists to understand the coverage of dowry.

### ***'Peak periods' and media content***

The idea that the agenda initiated by the news media influence the public's agenda has its roots in the 1922 book, *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, where he wrote about 'the world outside and the pictures in our heads' (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). In 1972, McCombs and Shaw carried out the first empirical studies on agenda-setting. The first phases of agenda-setting research concentrated on the question 'who sets the public agenda – and under what conditions?' while the recent phase of research has moved its attention to 'who

sets the media agenda?' (McCombs, 1993, p. 60). This question has linked agenda-setting research to a number of social science disciplines. The sociology of news literature and its vast range of concepts that influences the shaping of the daily agenda of news are relevant to this characteristic of agenda-setting research. Studies done by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explored perspectives like 'media routines' and 'organizational sociology.'

Related to this question of 'who sets the media agenda?' (McCombs, 1993, p. 60), some researchers have explored the aspect of agenda-setting theory that sees events as the cause of an issue arising in the media agenda. In Rogers, Dearing, and Chang's (1991) study of the coverage of AIDS, different events associated with the disease kept AIDS in the media agenda. Traditional approaches to agenda setting have provided only partial explanations of issue development in the public sphere. Agenda setting, in this case, can be more broadly defined as the 'study of how public issues gain or lose importance relative to other issues over time' (Rogers et al., 1991). They found the existence of 'peak periods' in the newspaper coverage of AIDS. Events such as the press release based on an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, or the death of actor Rock Hudson from AIDS, brought about these 'peak periods' in the media coverage of the AIDS epidemic. Events such as these cause a 'triggering effect,' leading to an increase in coverage. It was important for this study to examine the cycle of newspaper coverage and understand what events increased the coverage.

*RQ1:* In general, what does the cycle of newspaper coverage of dowry look like? Are there discernible 'peak periods' that emerge from this pattern of coverage?

### ***Framing and media content***

A consistently growing body of research in framing studies has grown from different disciplines and merges research from different domains (D'Angelo, 2002; Scheufele, 1999; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). Conceptually, framing can be said to have two broad foundations: sociological (Entman, 1991; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; and others) and psychological (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Iyengar, 1991; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; and others). The sociological concept of framing is related directly to understanding media content.

Goffman (1974) was one of the first scholars to have developed the general concept of framing. He defined it as the 'principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them' (Goffman, 1974, p. 10). He calls frames the 'schemata of interpretation,' a framework that helps in interpreting events into something meaningful. Frames have also been defined as devices that facilitate how journalists organize massive amounts of information and package them effectively for their audiences (Gitlin, 1980). According to Gitlin (1980), frames are 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion,' that organize the information for both journalists and their audiences (p. 7).

Entman (1993) emphasizes on selection and salience in framing research: '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 a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (p. 52). He further defines salience as 'making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences' (Entman, 1993, p. 53). This study adopts Entman's (1993) definition of frames to examine the aspects of dowry that was made salient by the newspapers.

Framing analysis has been one of the most common methods of studying media content. Entman (1991) studied US coverage of international news using a combination of textual and visual framing. Contrasting news frames were used to frame two similar military incidents: in 1983, a Soviet fighter plane shot down a Korean passenger plane while, in 1988, a US Navy ship shot down an IranAir flight. In both cases, all passengers and crewmembers were killed. He says that by 'de-emphasizing the agency and the victims and by the choice of graphics and adjectives,' the news stories about the Soviet downing of a Korean jet was depicted as a 'moral outrage' and the US downing of an Iranian plane as a 'technical problem' (Entman, 1991, p. 6).

*RQ 2:* What were the salient frames used by the Indian press to inform the public about dowry in India?

Prior research has shown that factors such as journalistic routines and ideological or political orientation of journalists might play a significant role in how journalists choose stories (Edelman, 1993; Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). However, in general, studies examining media frames often ignore how journalists frame issues and what could be potential reasons for using certain frames. Researchers fail to link the frames back to 'specific sponsors or to consider the economic and cultural resources available to sponsors to promote frames' (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 219). In an attempt to understand the role of journalists in the frame-building process, the study asks the last research question

*RQ3:* How do journalists employ frames in the construction of stories about dowry?

## Methodology

### *Study design*

This study employed a content analysis of newspaper texts to examine the media content of dowry in India. A quantitative content analysis is a method common to media content studies, a research design that provides an outline for making sense of media discourse. Kerlinger (1986) defines content analysis as 'systematic, objective and quantitative' (p. 477).

### *Sample*

Two national newspapers and the top two regional newspapers in terms of circulation were selected from the sampling universe of all Indian newspapers. The top two national newspapers were *The Hindustan Times* and *The Hindu*; however due to inadequate archives of *The Hindustan Times* available online, the second and the third newspapers, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, were chosen. The selection of the most widely circulated newspapers means that the information reaches the maximum number of audience members. The two national newspapers are published in New Delhi, the capital city, also situated in the Northern belt where dowry incidences are reportedly most common in the country. The two regional newspapers chosen were *The Tribune* and *The Telegraph*. Besides being the most-circulated regional papers, these papers gave different perspectives on the issue of dowry from two different states.

All articles selected mentioned the word 'dowry' at least three times within the article. This avoided the selection of articles that looked at the issue only superficially. They were collected using the Lexis/Nexis database and was supplemented by each newspaper's

electronic archives. The unit of analysis for this study is the paragraph. The journalists' frames were examined by interviewing a convenience sample of journalists from the newspapers under study. The journalists were interviewed via email as well as by telephone.

### *Inter-coder reliability*

A random sample of 10% of the total population of the stories was coded to assess inter-coder reliability. Three independent coders were trained to use the coding instrument. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Reliability was assessed for the presence of the dominant frames. The percentage of agreement between the three coders was established at an average of 93.4% on all measures.

### *Conceptualizations*

#### *Cycle of newspaper coverage*

The cycle of coverage was referred to the patterns of the coverage in the 7-year period. It was defined as the total number of articles published during the period. The total number of articles published was counted for each year and then graphed.

### *Frames*

Even though framing has been used to examine media content, scholars have often criticized the conceptual problems in the definition of frames. In many content analysis studies numerous frames are generated, which are often synonymous with story topics or issue positions (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Hertog and McLeod (2001) point out that framing analysis should try to develop a set of consistent frames. These 'agreed-upon' frames can be tested consistently with different issues. However, some issues might call upon 'unique frames.' Entman's (1991) study on the KAL flight or Shah et al.'s (2002) study on the Clinton scandal examined 'unique frames' (Fu, 2006). The present study included a set of consistent frames to examine how dowry was depicted in the press. A sample of relevant stories from all four newspapers was analyzed to identify salient frames. Though there has not been any framing analysis of the issue before, identification of the major frames was based also on the previous content analysis done on dowry (Garg, 1990; Joseph & Sharma, 1994; Prasad, 1994). The salient frames identified fall into four categories: (1) episodic vs. (2) thematic – (3) ethical vs. (4) material.

#### *Episodic vs. thematic frames*

Framing research has developed diverse categories to study the news media. It was Iyengar (1991) who first differentiated all media stories into two formats: episodic (focused on specific events) and thematic (focused on a broader context). The episodic news frame presents a 'case study' or 'event-oriented' report, revolving around concrete instances. A thematic frame provides contextual background, directed at general outcomes and conditions. Most news stories are not wholly episodic or thematic; however, one of these frames is typically dominant and can be identified by reading the stories in full (Iyengar, 1991). Stories that presented single, specific event-driven cases were coded as episodic.

Stories were coded thematic if they integrate events into an overarching issue and provide background knowledge about the issue (Nitz & West, 2004). Considering the issue of dowry and its social relevance, it was important to examine the use of episodic and thematic frames to understand whether the Indian press merely reported single incidents of dowry as crime reports or gave more in-depth coverage.

### *Ethical vs. material*

Scholars have differentiated ethical and material media frames (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Shah et al., 1996). An ethical interpretation of an issue will portray it as concerned with human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal ethics. However, a material frame will be 'grounded in economics, expedience, and practicality' (Shah et al., 1996, p. 516). The issue of dowry is related to both ethical and material concepts. It has been understood as a human rights issue. It has gained international attention as a gross aberration of women's rights. However, dowry is equally associated to a material interpretation of the issue. Dowry is, after all, related to money and property. It is about how much a bridegroom is worth and how much a bride's family is willing to pay for her marriage. It is significant for a study of media frames of dowry to examine how the issue got portrayed. Some of the stories could not be included in the broadly identified frames and were included in the 'other' frame. It is also worth noting that some of the stories overlap and are included in multiple frames.

### *Journalists' frames and routines*

The last research question aims to determine the factors that led to the kind of coverage of the dowry issue as revealed by the content analysis. A qualitative analysis of the journalists' responses was used to determine the frames that might have been used by the journalists and the reasons they might have been given for the kind of coverage.

### *Coding*

Each news story was coded for the presence of the four identified frames. The overall presence of the frames was evaluated by using the two-thirds rule (Nitz & West, 2004). This rule states that the frame is coded to be dominant in a story when it appears two-thirds of the time or more. Every paragraph was coded as 'not present' (0) or 'present' (1), depending on the presence of the frame. If the story was judged to include the two frames, for instance episodic and thematic somewhat equally, those were marked 'mixed frame' (2) and were not included in the analysis. The total number of episodic vs. thematic frames was then counted. The dominance of a frame was determined if a particular frame was above the two-thirds level. This particular coding scheme was used because it is possible that one story can contain multiple frames. Conflicting frames can appear in stories of the same issue (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). As a result, using the two-thirds rule helped to identify the dominant frame in a particular story.

## **Results**

### *Pattern of coverage*

A total of 4058 articles on dowry were retrieved from the four newspapers. To examine the cycle of newspaper coverage, the total number of articles in each paper per year was

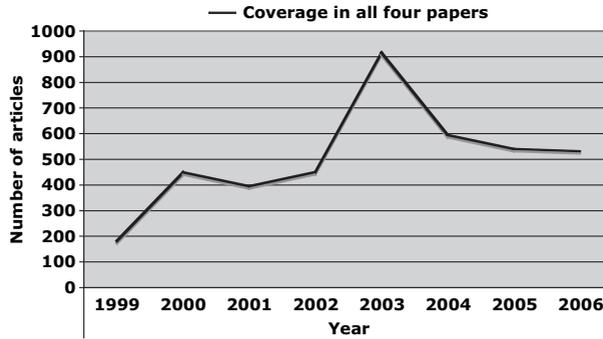


Figure 1. The pattern of peak periods in all four newspapers, 1999–2006.

charted against time. Figure 1 shows two prominent ‘peak periods’ in the coverage in 2000 and 2003. Overall, there was a steady rise in the number of articles over 7 years, with the coverage peaking due to high profile dowry cases in 2000 and 2003. The four papers combined produced only 182 articles about the issue in 1999, which grew to 916 articles in 2003, showing a prominent ‘peak period’ and then a decrease in the coverage to 531 articles in 2006. The two national newspapers, *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*, covered the issue with the same intensity. However, there was a huge difference between the two regional newspapers. *The Tribune* produced a total of 2855 articles, outperforming the national papers, while *The Telegraph* came up with only 190 articles about the topic.

*Episodic vs. thematic frames*

Episodic frames dominated the coverage in all four papers. Of the 4058 articles selected for the 7-year period, 2881 stories (71%) were coded as episodic and the remaining 29% as thematic (Figure 2).

*Ethical vs. material frames*

All four papers used the material frame abundantly. A total of 3084 articles (76%) were coded as material while 24% were ethical (Figure 2). Chi-square tests were conducted to examine the differences between the four identified frames. There was a significant

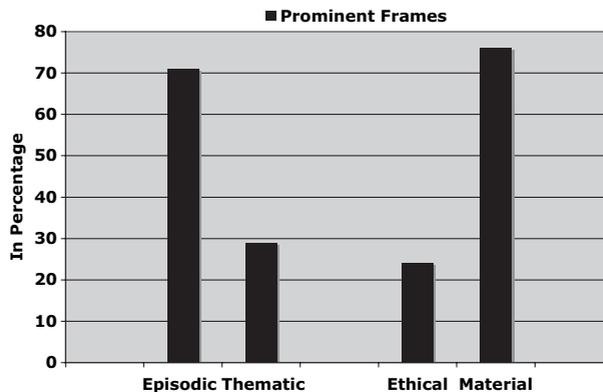


Figure 2. Prominent frames in all four newspapers.

difference between the episodic and thematic frames (chi-square = 11.53,  $p < .01$ ) and ethical vs. material frames (chi-square = 15.12,  $p < .001$ ).

Besides examining the prominent frames in the coverage, the intensity of occurrence of the common frames was counted during the 'peak periods.' This was done in order to link the patterns of the coverage to the prominent frames identified in the coverage. Results show that the two main dowry stories that caused the 'peak periods' also caused a more in-depth analysis of the issue. During both 2000 and 2003, stories containing thematic and ethical frames were more common. During these two periods, the stories were also longer than for the other years under study. The average number of words in the four newspapers for the 7-year period was 388.31. The length of stories ranged from 29 to 3461 words. During 2000 and 2003, the mean length of articles rose to 458.12 and 646.23, respectively. So the two peak periods intensified the coverage in terms of number of articles as well and the length of those articles.

### *Journalists' frames and routines*

To answer the last research question, a convenience sample of 38 journalists from the four newspapers studied was interviewed via email and by telephone. When asked if they thought their newspaper caused awareness of dowry as a social issue, 96% of the journalists from all four newspapers answered in the affirmative. One editor from *The Times of India* said: 'it is indeed possible that some of the editors and journalists might practice dowry but as far as the newspaper is concerned, they would always write against dowry and hence cause awareness.' Asked about how stories related to dowry were chosen, 95% said the stories they publish are news reports of dowry cases chosen purely based on conventional news values such as 'immediacy' and 'perceived importance.' Indeed most journalists pointed out that the 'newsworthiness' of the story is a very important factor influencing publication decisions. A journalist from *The Times of India* observed: 'just like any other story for the day, the dowry-related stories are also based on newsworthiness and immediacy.'

Asked about the use of frames in the coverage, 78% of the journalists said most dowry stories get 'framed' as crime stories. A journalist from *The Tribune* explained: 'on a regular day, a dowry murder case gets reported as any other crime story, if the story becomes big for other reasons, in-depth coverage follows and other social implications of dowry get highlighted.' Journalists also talked about a 'social evil' frame: portraying dowry as a detriment to society. Most of the journalists characterized their dowry coverage as consisting of in-depth, investigative as well as straight news reports. 'It is not that one newspaper carries more in-depth stories than the other,' said another editor, 'sometimes a dowry-related incident demands investigative stories while in most cases they cannot be more than mere reports.' Almost all the journalists point out that the in-depth coverage of Nisha Sharma's case was because of its 'newsworthiness.' A journalist from *The Times of India* aptly remarked: 'Nisha Sharma made headlines because of the immediacy and newsworthiness of the case, in most instances dowry-related cases can be nothing more than a short report.' An editor from *The Tribune* noted: 'there is nothing new in a dowry case that can have follow-up stories, and in most cases the groom's as well as the victim's family refuse to cooperate with the media.'

The journalists agreed that one of the factors that might have accounted for the nature of the papers' dowry coverage was 'political correctness.' Dowry, they claimed, is a social evil and even though it is traditionally tied to Indian marriages, they claimed their newspaper always took an anti-dowry stance. A senior editor opined that: 'the political

correctness of any issue is very important, and dowry is no exception.' The editors added that a paper's coverage of dowry-related stories was related directly to its service areas. A journalist from *The Telegraph* explained that the paper's limited dowry coverage was due to the practice not being as common as it is in the northern parts of India. Besides, he continued, dowry-related stories are not considered 'market friendly.' This was an opinion echoed by most of the journalists. They claimed people do not like to read about dowry-related stories, which they consider as reflecting the 'ugly truth' about Indian society.

## Discussion

Before discussing the results, it is important to point the caveats in the study. The study depended on the Lexis/Nexis database and the electronic archives of the newspapers for the articles analyzed. The regional newspapers were not available on Lexis/Nexis, so the electronic archives of the papers were the only source, which in some years were not updated fully. Due to unavailability of archives and language barriers, the vernacular press in India could not be examined. It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct a qualitative analysis of individual articles. A qualitative analysis might be able to highlight nuances in the coverage, for instance differences between articles published in *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* that a quantitative analysis might fail to do. Despite some of these limitations, this study is pertinent to understanding the newspaper content of dowry and 'frame sponsorship' of the issue. It is worth noting that there can be many factors responsible for 'framing' an issue such as dowry, the journalists' frames being just one of those factors. The study attempts to demonstrate the importance of employing multiple methods to understand media content by using the case study of dowry.

In all four newspapers, the 'peak period' was triggered by two major dowry cases: the Ilyasi dowry murder case in 2000 and the Nisha Sharma case in 2003. The high-profile case of Suhaib Ilyasi, a television producer-director who allegedly murdered his wife for dowry, was responsible for the intensified coverage of dowry in 2000. Similarly, in 2003, when Nisha Sharma eschewed her would-be husband, coverage in all four papers experienced a spike.

The coverage of *The Tribune* was the most intense of all the four papers. This is perhaps because it services Punjab, a region where there is a significant number of dowry-related cases. In 2001, the reported number of dowry-related deaths in India was recorded at 6851, of which 1500 cases were in the state of Punjab alone (National Crime Records Bureau, 2007). Two high-profile cases in the state of Punjab also contributed to the intense coverage of *The Tribune* (published in the state of Punjab) in the years 2001 and 2002. A famous veteran Hindi film actress, Nirupa Roy, was arrested in a dowry harassment case in 2001. In 2002, Giani Kewal Singh, a religious leader, was arrested on an alleged dowry-death case involving his daughter-in-law. Dowry-related cases are least reported in the eastern parts. As such, the coverage of *The Telegraph*, published in Calcutta, was the least intense in terms of number of dowry-related articles. The pattern of the dowry coverage in all four papers shows that there has been an overall increase in the intensity of the coverage. The prominent 'peak periods' in both 2000 and 2003, and also 2001 and 2002 in the case of *The Tribune*, shows that high-profile and 'newsworthy' dowry cases intensified coverage during those years.

The dominance of episodic frames demonstrates that dowry was reported as crime stories. The broader social implications were discussed only in 29% of the coverage. Episodic frames do not provide any background or context to the events and as a result they do not help the audience to contextualize the events and or draw linkages between the

issues and society (Iyengar, 1991; Nitz & West, 2004). The episodic frames fail to depict the broader consequences of the dowry to the readers. This is explained by the journalists' answers as well. The majority of the journalists suggested that dowry is covered like any other crime story. As a result, the issue gets framed in episodic, event-driven, and individual terms. In general, victims get portrayed as isolated cases instead of being connected to a group and linked to other victims. The frames used in the media coverage can be explained by the responses of the journalists. The dominant 'frame' chosen by the journalists is 'crime,' which means the issue mostly gets covered as a crime story, episodic and individual. The stories included in the thematic frame are the stories that talk about the dowry victims as a group and not isolated cases. These stories can also be explained through the lens of the 'social evil' frame mentioned in some of the journalists' responses.

The findings also demonstrate that the issue is interpreted in material terms. Most of the articles mention the amount of dowry, or about tussles due to property transfer. However, few articles linked the issue of dowry to the women's rights or to the broader concept of human rights. The ethics behind killing one's wife or daughter-in-law for money or property is highlighted in fewer articles. As such, the ethical frame will call for more investigative stories, where the case of dowry death is associated with broader concepts. The stories included in the material frame are the more common short reports: a dowry case is reported with the descriptions of the victim, location, and the amount of dowry demanded or fights over failure to provide adequate dowry.

It is interesting that the dowry stories during the two peak periods contained more thematic and ethical frames. The two newsworthy events not only increased the coverage in sheer numbers, but it also caused a more in-depth analysis of the issue. The examination of both the pattern of the coverage and the prominent frames helps in the thorough understanding of the media content. It facilitates the understanding of not only the prominent frames used to interpret the issue in the newspapers, but also when these frames are more commonly used.

In general, the driving force of the coverage is the marketability of the stories. This is suggested in the patterns in the overall coverage as well as in the answers of the journalists. Many of the journalists believed that dowry-related stories are not market friendly. As one editor said: 'the market needs "feel good" lies. Dowry deaths are the ugly truth.' This attitude partly explains why most dowry-related stories are just short reports in the crime pages. In-depth and investigative articles are carried only when some dowry-related case proves to be 'newsworthy' and as a result is able to influence coverage intensity. In 2003, the Nisha Sharma case elicited in-depth coverage across all papers. It is also worth noting that in all four newspapers, the stories that caused the spikes in the coverage were dowry cases that occurred in the affluent sections of society. For example, Nisha Sharma is a computer engineer and belongs to a rich family in Delhi, the capital city of India. Ilyasi is a famous and rich television producer. Nirupa Roy was a veteran film actress, and Kewal Singh is a popular religious leader from Punjab. These stories caught the media's attention due to their 'newsworthiness' as well as their marketability. As one of the journalists pointed out: 'Generally, it appears the media here have not taken the issue seriously, save some stray write-ups or a coverage due to some "big" story. The fact that the evil practice still continues unabated is a telling commentary on the indifference of the media here. If there is no extra news value, such as the involvement of a celebrity, news relating to dowry deaths is buried in some obscure column.'

The coverage of an issue such as dowry was deemed to highlight the normative responsibilities of journalists. This is an issue with an ethical dimension and as already mentioned scholars have summarized the framework of such coverage. The significant

components of such a coverage highlighting the individual, institutional, professional, social, and legal dimensions (Craig, 1999) are present in the dowry coverage. However, that is not the majority of the coverage. The greater part of the coverage was mere crime reports. The in-depth coverage capable of serving society according to the normative framework and social responsibility theories (Rivers, Schramm, & Christians, 1980; Siebert et al., 1963; and others) is spurred occasionally by 'newsworthy' events. These results emphasize the journalists' routines as the main factors that drive the coverage.

The feminist movement in India has also influenced the intense media coverage of the issue. The feminist movement has a long and chequered history. The rights and wrongs of women became major issues in the nineteenth century and by the late nineteenth century women started participating in the feminist movement, which till then was largely conducted by men. The early nineteenth-century activists made a case of the fact that women's differences from men should not be the reason for their subjection. Later reformists however argued that it was the exactly this difference that made women 'socially useful (women as mothers)' (Kumar, 1993, p. 2), so it was necessary to take care of their conditions. The symbolic use of the mother as a 'rallying force' was common in the first half of the twentieth century. In pre-independence India feminists worked with both gender-based definitions and with an existence based on equality and sameness (Kumar, 1993).

The struggle for freedom and independence from the British was surprisingly gender-neutral. This experience, along with people's exposure to Western education and international attention to the status of women, has led to attempts to lift women's position in society. These attempts were mainly constitutional rights, legislative action, focus in development activities of women, and 'more importantly, non-governmental actions spearheaded by women's organizations at various levels' (Agrawal & Rao, 2004, p. 24).

In post-independence India, the feminist movement based itself firmly on the principles of equality and declared that gender-based structures oppressed and subordinated women. The symbol of the mother was used rarely and was replaced by the use of the woman as a 'daughter' and woman as a 'working woman.' By the early 1970s, the Indian feminist movement broke into small fragments. Various new ideas and movements developed: the Shahada, anti-price-rise agitations, SEWA, anti-alcohol agitation, and many more. The first instances of dowry murder cases attracted the attention of women's organizations in the late 1970s. Nationwide protests by feminist groups drew media attention, which resulted in hefty media coverage of the issue. Dowry was one of the most central issues of the Indian women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and 'was considered synonymous with the women's movement' (Sheel, 1999, p. 103).

Anti-dowry demonstrations by women's groups assisted the progress of smaller action committees, organizational committees by several political parties, and augmented the social awareness of the issue. The women's movement also helped in the development of direct methods of communication such as street plays, counseling through women's centers, and the anti-dowry police cells. The women's movement was also responsible for many significant studies that were conducted in search of information and statistics. Surveys that were conducted demonstrated the spread of dowry to communities that did not practise it historically; contributing factors were found to be traditional family values, lack of legal knowledge among women, and an inclination to underplay the dowry menace (Sheel, 1999).

In their examination of a variety of women's issues covered by Indian newspapers from 1979 to 1988, Joseph and Sharma (1994) emphasize the ability of the media in India 'to

influence the attitudes of both ordinary readers and policy-makers' (p. 15). They found that the newspapers covered issues such as dowry deaths, but these stories saw print only when 'a woman's issue fits the dominant definitions of newsworthiness.' Only then can it 'move up in the hierarchy of news and consequently get greater coverage' (Joseph & Sharma, 1994, p. 27). This study also found that the newspaper coverage of dowry still mostly consists of routine reporting, with some big story intensifying the coverage occasionally. Every media agency is relatively dependent on financial factors in setting the media agenda so that, unless a dowry story has ample 'newsworthiness,' it is often ignored.

Sen (2003) explains that a fair amount of the media's coverage is taken up by image managers and public relations professionals from various organizations. As such, journalists get their job done easily without having to worry much about news-gathering. Because social development issues do not often benefit from the strategies of image managers unless journalists and editors take a special interest in them or some big story breaks, issues such as dowry remain mostly as short news reports. Media coverage is also dictated by audience demand. There is perhaps more demand for 'infotainment' and sensational news coverage than for issues like dowry (Sen, 2003).

There is no doubt that the media can be influential in causing awareness of social issues such as dowry. However, there are many other factors that can facilitate the eradication of dowry: a stricter legal system; an awareness of the laws; education; financial independence of women; and most importantly the ability to resist some of the rituals that bind dowry to the Indian tradition. The socialization of girls to be dependent on a male member (father, brother, or husband) is a massive concern. It is imperative that parents and the community, 'treat the girl as an individual rather than someone they nurture for her husband and his family' (Saxena, 2007, p. 276). As dowry is most commonly disguised as a tradition, it is understandably an enormous task for girls to be able to refute these rituals. However, there are cases such as Nisha Sharma's and others that demonstrate it is possible to do so with the support of the family. The awareness of these and many other factors is fundamental. This is where the media can play a significant role: to cause awareness of not only the number of dowry crimes but also give an in-depth analysis of the causes, consequences, and possible solutions of this social menace.

This study employed the literature on patterns in media coverage and 'peak periods'; framing analysis of media content and the qualitative analysis of journalists' responses to understand the media content of dowry. Most content analysis studies examine the prominent frames used to interpret an issue. However important these studies are, they demonstrate just a slice of the whole picture. These studies often neglect the relationship between these frames and the events leading to the coverage or the journalists who create these 'frames' for numerous social, cultural, or financial reasons. In the present study, a qualitative examination of the journalists' responses provides an understanding why the prominent frames in the newspaper coverage were chosen. Of course, there can be many factors responsible for the way journalists decide to depict an issue. This study is a preliminary attempt at understanding this process. Future media content studies should explore other issues and media systems. A broader variety of issues and an understanding of journalists' responses to these issues will further the understanding of research examining media content.

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