

Constructive Journalism In Bangladesh During Covid-19 In the Context of the Rise of Omicron Variant

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Abstract

This article is going to examine the Covid-19 pandemic media coverage of Bangladesh through the lens of constructive journalism. As the whole pandemic is now such a broad field to work with, it is going to cover the recently discovered Omicron variant reports. The article mainly consists of two parts. In the first part it presents theoretical discussion on the concept of constructive journalism and its characteristics. The second part is coverage collection and its analysis. For the coverage collection a prominent national daily of Bangladesh named *The Daily Star* has been selected. The reports of the first month from the day the news of the first case appeared have been tabulated. Content analysis method has been used here to go through the news. Then an analysis of the month-long coverage and a comparative discussion between the constructive journalism theory and the result found from analyzing the coverage is presented here.

Keywords: Constructive Journalism, Covid-19, Pandemic, Omicron Variant, Media, News, Bangladesh

Introduction

Journalism has been a profession for centuries. It is constantly evolving and looking for new ways to listen to and communicate with people. Constructive journalism is a significant finding of that very journey.

One of the most common tendencies of journalism have been the use of negativity bias to attract people to the news (Gyldensted, 2015: 5-6) as it is commonly believed that negative news strikes people more, it makes them more upset and they think about it more. That is why it is produced more. Hence a very common saying goes in this profession, "If it bleeds, it leads."

And this is where the idea of constructive journalism comes in, where the focus is on the solutions, not the problems.

For the past two years Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped the world in many ways. Bangladesh has been experiencing it too, in its own way. Today our everyday world has become so difficult and hard more than ever in the recent years that the negative notion in news is working on people in a very different way. It's not attracting or astounding people, it has started to make them more insensitive and numb to the situation. As Gyldensted (2015) showed negative news has resulted in people's increasing disengagement from important societal issues as the news gives them "a feeling of hopelessness." We've witnessed how at one point the daily Covid updates and death rates had started to become mere numbers. Moreover, the lack of trust, engagement between people and media organizations is seen very clearly. It is high time we make better choices.

Constructive journalism is considered to be a possible solution to these increasing problems. Day by day this journalism method is becoming more relevant and broadly recognized by the people in this field all over the world as a possible method for the media to communicate people.

It is high time we evaluate the nature of the news we provide and how that might impact our people. The recent pandemic coverage is a great opportunity to evaluate, examine and read how our news media face such jarring negativity and present them to people.

Objective

This study is going to analyze the news coverage of Omicron variant and look at the extent and presence — if there is any — of constructive journalism in the conventional practice of Bangladesh. First, it will go through the studies explaining the theory of constructive journalism and present a literature review. Present here what constructive journalism is according to the studies, as it is still an idea not known enough. Then the tabulated news covering the Omicron variant from a selected print media over a selected time period will be presented here. Next, the article will present an analysis of the coverage collection. Although this study works with a part of the pandemic— the

Omicron variant coverage— this article hopes to be able to see the bigger picture through reading this relatively short part very thoroughly.

Bangladesh: Journalism in the Pandemic Period

Bangladeshi media is no different from the “if it bleeds, it leads” attitude. And we unfortunately have as much negativity to share as others. Most common among them are the issues with corruption, road-safety, over-population, unemployment, and recently the pandemic. In times of crisis, public consumption of news often changes dramatically (Westlund and Ghersetti, 2015) The pandemic is no different. But with time people gradually turned away from the news. The negativity started affecting them mentally. A study says, “some participants never returned to their initial high rate of news consumption for another set of reasons: the various mental health problems associated with Covid-19 news consumption.” (Nguyen, Smith and others, 2021) Same is the case for Bangladesh. People have become from being concerned to stunned to completely careless. We are seeing a wave of nonchalance towards the news media, the opulence of news portals lacking credibility and widespread misinformation regarding corona virus and its cures. (Al-Zaman, 2020)

These are the possible outcomes of decades of extreme negativity in the news. The hopelessness it creates makes people numb and lack reasons due to the absence of any solution, or context or proper information. That is why it is high time we look for and discuss the alternative ways of communication. A way that speaks solution. The introduction to constructive journalism and constructive assessment of our news might play a role towards the positive change we are craving.

Methodology

The method used here for this study is content analysis. It is a very effective way to conduct research where we take a content— here certain news reports — and try to study certain patterns, themes, concepts etc. Understanding the correlations and patterns of partial texts help us get a hold of the bigger picture. Hence it is used to examine patterns in communication in a replicable

and systematic manner. (Alan, 2011). In analyzing the text, Stuart Hall's Representation theory is heavily relied on. (Hall 1997).

This article is going to study covid coverage. But the pandemic has been going on for more than the past two years. So, it has been decided to work on a part of the pandemic, the recently discovered variant — Omicron. Here the selective sampling method has been used. For the purpose of easy access online, *The Daily Star* as the print media is chosen to work on. It is also one of the most prominent dailies of the country. So, it largely presents the notable tendencies existing in Bangladesh's journalism practices. There is always loss in translation, to avoid this, only English-language texts are analyzed as *The Daily Star* is an English daily.

Due to the limitation of time and space, only one month of print-only coverage from 12th December 2021 to 12th January 2022 is chosen to work on. The table is divided into six columns: Item Number, Date of Publication, Title, Type, Page Number and Online Link. These categories are quite self-explanatory. Although the reports are from print publication, all of them are published online too. Online links are included for easy access to those reports. It should be noted that sometimes the same report gets published online a day earlier and come to print the next day. In the table the dates of the print publication were followed. So, the online date and the date on the column may vary sometimes.

Constructive Journalism: The Theory and Characteristics

For a long period of time journalism has been about sensation, shock, drama and negativity. It's been more about attracting people to click by presenting the situation more than the situation itself. There are other types of journalism, but the prominent practice has always been the sheer use of shock value and negativity, the negativity bias. The negativity bias, also known as the negativity effect, is the notion that, even when of equal intensity, things of a more negative nature (e.g. unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or social interactions; harmful/traumatic events) have a greater effect on one's psychological state and processes than neutral or positive things. (Baumeister, Finkenauer and Kathleen, 2001)

This type of journalism does work to an extent to engage people, which also serves the business purposes of media, but it hardly contributes to changing the situation it presents so negatively. And there sure are a lot to change. It has started to make people disconnected from the news related media. "People are also increasingly losing their trust in news organizations, perceiving them as biased in their coverage or as interested only in generating clicks", according to Haagerup. "One effect of this is that audiences may become more susceptible to believing misinformation shared on social media" (MacGregor 2020).

Constructive journalism is a solution in light of these concerns. The notion of this idea is not fully formed yet. (McIntyre, 2015) There are different types of journalism that also falls into this spectrum such as positive journalism (Dagan Wood, 2014), and solutions journalism (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017).

"Constructive journalism is a new way of approaching news, which is based on the idea that there is a negativity bias in the news media that needs to be corrected. Instead of overemphasizing what is going wrong in the world, it aims to provide audiences with a fair, accurate and contextualized picture." (MacGregor 2020) It gives a balanced and complete aspect of what is going on in the world. When news messages lead to more positive emotions such as hope and optimism, and decreases negative emotions such as fear and anger, news will contribute to the well-being of people (Fredrickson, 2001). It has emerged as a form of journalism that aims to create positive social impact (Gyldensted 2011; Haagerup 2014; McIntyre 2015) by informing people of issues and by suggesting specific, effective ways to resolve these issues (Gans 2011)

Constructive journalism falls into the spectrum of some other similar type of journalism such as solution-based journalism, impact journalism, development journalism.

Characteristics

Aitamurto and Varma (2018) describes in their research the key distinguishing aspects of a constructive role are:

- A focus on solutions to social problems,

- An ideal of social progress,
- Reporting practices oriented around hope,
- High interventionism, and
- Positioning the journalist as what Krüger (2017; 410–411) calls a “change-agent”.

These are five essential characteristics of constructive journalism.

In a research Hermans and Gyldensted described “Six underlying points of application” for constructive journalism categorized in 2018 by the Journalism Department of Windesheim University. (Hermans and Gyldensted 2018). These points are:

- **Solutions:** Framing and presenting the news as being solution-oriented.
- **Future Orientation:** With the existing 5W1H, adding a ‘What now?’ point. It will help set a goal for the future, and help people get there.
- **Inclusiveness and Diversity:** Adding more perspective to the news. Avoiding polarizing dynamics.
- **Empower People:** Going out of the victim-expert dimension. Asking questions and engaging more people.
- **The Rosling:** Giving context to the news. Explaining the whole story through clear data, graph, information, audio-visual resource etc.
- **Co-creation:** Including the public. Co-creating the news and facing the situation together.

So, the main characteristic of constructive journalism is: it is solution-oriented. It gives the news a context, proper information. It talks about changes. It sets a goal for the future and look forward towards achieving that goal. And it includes people in the process.

Thus, it gives people hope and contribute to the well-being of the society. Thus, it becomes a change maker.

Coverage Analysis

A text always represents something. Texts generally have several meanings. There are lots of ways a text can be represented. Journalism talks a lot about objectivity but hardly succeed to present the situation as it is. It re-presents an event, a situation and there are always some implications lying under the representation.

Analyzing the coverage of the Omicron variant is to analyze how it is represented in the media. What is the overall tone, the usage of words, what is presented in the news, as well as what is absent. Earlier we found six characteristics of constructive journalism. In this chapter we will be reading the reports in the light of those characteristics. Keeping those in mind while analyzing, various aspects and characteristics of Omicron variant news coverage is presented here:

Negative Tone: The overall attitude of the reports has a negative tone in general. The second news appeared on *The Daily Star* regarding the variant (Item number 02) says it is a 'variant of concern' in the title. Although inside the report it says, "Omicron infection has not yet been proven more dangerous than infection with other forms." (Daily Star 2021) But the title still warns people about it. Out of the 62 coverage we are discussing here, most of them has a negative tone alone in the title. Where it refers to the variant as being a "serious threat" (Item number 07), "biggest threat" (Item number 09), "threat across the globe" (Item number 17), a variant of "very high risk" (Item number 37) etc. Although the accurate risk factor of the variant was not known to the media or even the scientists, they kept warning people and had a negative attitude about it from the start.

Lack of Solution: The reports are not solution oriented. The first case of Omicron was detected in Bangladesh in December of 2021. 21 months after the first ever Covid-19 case was detected in the country in March of 2020. The media had already known that the negative bias was not attracting people anymore. It'd mentally paralyzed people, making them indifferent to the news and situation. The reports were still negatively biased and lacked the search for a solution.

There were mainly three types of reports here. Ones that summed up the releases about Omicron information from foreign organization such as WHO, EU, titled “WHO: Vaccines may be less effective against Omicron”, “G7: Omicron ‘biggest threat’ to world health” etc. (Item number: 05, 08, 09, 21, 22, 33, 36, 37, 49). Secondly, the daily covid update of the country – “Daily Covid infections drop below 300” (Item number 29), “Omicron Variant: Country logs 4 new cases” (Item number 34). And the lastly, the Omicron crisis of other countries – “Omicron cases surge in UK” (Item number 14) “Omicron: Thailand halting quarantine-free entry till Jan 4” (Item number 19) “Omicron spoils US holiday economic comeback” (Item number 41) etc.

We can see how these reports too have a negative attitude and not a search for solution.

Inconsistency: The reports have an inconsistency issue. One news about Omicron says, “No need to worry about Omicron” (Item number 03) where it describes “Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday said that there was no reason to be worried about the Omicron variant of the coronavirus as there was no evident transmission from the two infected cricketers in the country.” Two days after that, a report was published where Omicron was quoted as a “serious threat” (Item number 07).

We also see in a report that vaccines are considered “vital” for Omicron (“Jabs, boosters ‘vital’ against Omicron: EU”, Item number 08). Although only a day before that on the 16th December of 2021 a report was published where WHO questioned the effectiveness of the vaccine on Omicron (WHO: Vaccines may be less effective against Omicron, Item number 05).

Also, how much of a threat Omicron actually is, has always been a matter of question. Several reports stated this variant as a threat. But there were also reports contradicting that statement such as “No need to worry about Omicron” (Item number 03), “Omicron may be less severe, but not ‘mild’: WHO” (Item number 49).

Lack of Country Context: This point is an extended version of the previous point. Inconsistency occurs because of the lack of proper context and investigation. It has been stated here how these reports are of mainly three types: information summary from prominent foreign health organizations,

Omicron updates about other countries and daily update of Bangladesh. It is important to know what the organizations like WHO, EU are saying about the virus, but the media should also seek to see how the situation is in the context of Bangladesh. Because the virus does not work the same for all countries (Morris and Reuben, 2020). So, it is vital to examine the particular situation of Bangladesh. To give the information from foreign organizations a country context. Because when a report is published where WHO says, “Omicron may overwhelm healthcare” (Item number 33), and it is in the title, it might easily be perceived as the condition of our healthcare too. Which has not been the case for Omicron so far. The media should have cleared this context. Otherwise fear, doubt and panic grow among people (Is our health system ready to face Omicron?, Item number 58), which does not help solving any situation.

Usage of Negative Words: The words used in these reports are also noticeable. Titles are a great indicator of the news. It also largely detects whether people will read the news or not, or how they will perceive the news. The word **threat** was used several times in the news title (Item number: 07, 09, 27, 31, 45). Moreover, wording in the titles like “Omicron cases **surge** in UK” (Item number 14), “Omicron **raging** through world” (Item number 16), “WHO: ‘Another **storm** coming’” (Item number 22), “WHO: Omicron may **overwhelm** healthcare” (Item number 33), “WHO warns of ‘**very high**’ **Omicron risk**” (Item number 37), “World braces for Omicron **tsunami**” (Item number 38) shock people, raise fear among them. It does not help the productivity.

Positivity: There were positivity among the reports too. While the country was getting to know Omicron variant, vaccination and booster dose programs were also introduced to the people. *The Daily Star* seemed to present the vaccination and booster dose programs very positively. They wrote on one of their editorials the Covid vaccination program to be “on the right track” (Item number 40).

Comparison

It is quite clear from the coverage analysis that there is a lack of constructive attitude in presenting the news among those reports. If we compare the

characteristics of these news to the ones of constructive journalism, we see that this news is not solution oriented, which is a key component of constructive journalism. The journalist is no longer playing the role of a “change agent” (Krüger 2017). They are merely the supplier of information, most of the time without context and with a shocking title. As a result, they fail to deliver a clear picture of the problem and cannot set goal for the future towards solving the problem. That has a risk of leaving people helpless, upset and panicked.

Although the reports stay very positive, supportive and future-oriented about the vaccination program. Here we discovered a constructive side to the journalism.

Suggestion and Conclusion

Journalism does not confine itself into any restrictive process. It is only natural for its survival to evolve and grow. Bangladesh has been feeling the need for a change for some time now, but finally we have clearly seen through the catastrophe of the pandemic how it is no more enough for the journalists to just convey the message and profit from it. They need to play a role in changing the world around them. They need to engage the people more, associating and communicating with them. They need to listen more. The gradually increasing discussion on alternative journalism such as constructive journalism is already a step to the right path. I hope this study will contribute to this field towards that journey.

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Annex

Item List: *The Daily Star* Coverage of Omicron Variant

In this table here is presented a total of 62 reports regarding Omicron variant. These reports were published in the printed version of *The Daily Star* newspaper at that time.

Item Number	Date of Publication	Title	Type	Page Number	Online Link
01	12.12.2021	In Bangladesh: First Omicron cases detected	Feature	01	Link
02	12.12.2021	Omicron-a variant of concern	Feature	07	Link
03	13.12.2021	No need to worry about Omicron	Feature	02	Link
04	13.12.2021	OMICRON detected in Bangladesh	Editorial	08	Link
05	16.12.2021	WHO Vaccines may be less effective against Omicron	Feature	02	Link
06	16.12.2021	Covid Booster: Vaccination to begin in 7-10 days	Feature	02	Link
07	17.12.2021	Omicron 'serious threat'	Feature	06	Link
08	17.12.2021	Jabs, boosters 'vital' against Omicron: EU	Feature	12	Link
09	18.12.2021	G7: Omicron 'biggest threat' to world health	Feature	12	Link
10	18.12.2021	Omicron can fool antibodies, not others	Feature	12	Link
11	19.12.2021	Scientists' opinions on new Corona virus variant Omicron	Feature	07	Link

12	19.12.2021	Omicron cases doubling in 1.5 to 3 days	Feature	12	Link
13	19.12.2021	British hospitality businesses reel from Omicron surge	Feature	B3	Link
14	20.12.2021	Omicron cases surge in UK	Feature	12	Link
15	20.12.2021	Omicron scrambles anew US firms' in-person aspirations	Feature	B3	Link
16	21.12.2021	Omicron raging through world	Feature	02	Link
17	21.12.2021	Omicron Threat Across the Globe: Europe mulls Christmas curbs	Feature	06	Link
18	21.12.2021	prompts WEF to delay Davos summit	Feature	B4	Link
19	22.12.2021	Omicron: Thailand halting quarantine-free entry till Jan 4	Feature	02	Link
20	22.12.2021	Omicron now dominant in US	Feature	06	Link
21	22.12.2021	Fast-Spreading Omicron: WHO sounds warning	Feature	12	Link
22	23.12.2021	WHO 'Another storm coming'	Feature	12	Link
23	24.12.2021	USA Hospital risk lower with Omicron	Feature	06	Link
24	24.12.2021	Europe Canada expands aid to fight Omicron	Feature	B2	Link
25	24.12.2021	America: US consumers more confident in December despite Omicron	Feature	B3	Link
26	25.12.2021	Covid update: Country reports 342 new cases, one death	Feature	16	Link
27	26.12.2021	Europe Omicron threat mars Christmas	Feature	01	Link
28	26.12.2021	New variant, same old travel woes	Opinion Column	08	Link

29	26.12.2021	Daily Covid infections drop below 300	Feature	14	Link
30	26.12.2021	Indians flood markets, tourist spots despite Omicron concerns	Feature	B4	Link
31	27.12.2021	Omicron Threat: Travel chaos worsens	Feature	12	Link
32	28.12.2021	India's Omicron challenge on multiple fronts	Opinion Column	08	Link
33	29.12.2021	WHO Omicron may overwhelm healthcare	Feature	12	Link
34	29.12.2021	Omicron Variant: Country logs 4 new cases	Feature	12	Link
35	30.12.2021	Covid cases on the rise again	Feature	01	Link
36	30.12.2021	World must heed WHO's warning about Omicron	Editorial	08	Link
37	30.12.2021	WHO warns of 'very high' Omicron risk	Feature	12	Link
38	31.12.2021	World braces for Omicron tsunami	Feature	01	Link
39	31.12.2021	Covid-19: Schools may close again if cases rise	Feature	12	Link
40	02.01.2022	Covid vaccination programme on the right track	Editorial	08	Link
41	02.01.2022	Omicron spoils US holiday economic comeback	Feature	B4	Link
42	03.01.2022	Omicron could lead Israel to herd immunity: official	Feature	02	Link
43	03.01.2022	Covid cases jump 60pc in a week	Feature	12	Link
44	04.01.2022	Fresh concerns as Covid-19 cases rise	Editorial	12	Link
45	05.01.2022	Omicron threat: It's real and it's looming	Feature	01	Link

46	06.01.2022	Herd immunity?	Feature	07	Link
47	06.01.2022	Are we ready for the looming Omicron crisis?	Editorial	08	Link
48	07.01.2022	10 new cases raise Omicron spectre	Feature	01	Link
49	07.01.2022	Omicron may be less severe, but not 'mild': WHO	Feature	12	Link
50	08.01.2022	Brace for fresh Covid combat	Feature	01	Link
51	08.01.2022	Positivity rate highest in 15 weeks	Feature	01	Link
52	08.01.2022	Overwhelmed by Omicron, US hospitals delay surgeries	Feature	06	Link
53	08.01.2022	Take urgent steps to prevent Omicron spread	Editorial	08	Link
54	08.01.2022	India fears another Covid catastrophe	Feature	12	Link
55	09.01.2022	Europe Omicron keeps breaking records	Feature	12	Link
56	09.01.2022	Global Economy Omicron slams UK retail recovery	Feature	B2	Link
57	10.01.2022	Covid-19 Cases: Not alarming yet, but it's getting there	Feature	01	Link
58	10.01.2022	Is our health system ready to face Omicron?	Column	12	Link
59	11.01.2022	Covid curbs return from Thursday	Feature	01	Link
60	11.01.2022	How do we keep Omicron at bay? Together.	Column	08	Link
61	12.01.2022	Enforce Covid curbs properly	Editorial	08	Link
62	12.01.2022	Covid situation in Bangladesh: Things can get out of hand fast	Feature	12	Link