

QUALITATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF DENGUE AWARENESS COMMUNICATION IN ISLAMABAD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DAWN AND THE NATION (SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a qualitative discourse analysis of dengue disease coverage in two major Pakistani newspapers, Dawn and The Nation, during the peak dengue season (September– November 2025) in Islamabad. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) technique, this study investigates how media narratives build dengue as a public health issue, define governmental accountability, and place citizens in public health discourse. The analysis of 45 news stories indicates distinct ideological viewpoints. Dawn takes a critical investigative posture, emphasizing systemic failings, whereas The Nation takes a state-aligned, technocratic approach. Both publications prioritize official voices above community opinions, emphasizing individual behavioral change with institutional improvement.

The findings indicate that the impact of dengue awareness efforts may be limited since existing public health communication tactics predominantly view citizens as subjects of surveillance rather than as holders of rights.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, dengue fever, public health communication, media framing, Pakistan, Islamabad, health governance

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Since 1994, millions of people in Pakistan have been impacted by recurrent seasonal epidemics of dengue fever, which has become a persistent public health concern. Over 2,000 cases of dengue were recorded in Islamabad during the 2025 season, mostly in rural areas. This led to significant government action and media attention. The public's perception of health hazards, behavioural reactions, and the bounds of policy debate are all greatly influenced by media discourse.

Research Problem

The number of dengue cases is still high despite significant government funding for awareness initiatives, especially in densely populated places like Bhara Kahu (293 cases as of October 2025). This persistence calls into question the efficacy of the communication tactics used today. Although previous studies have looked at dengue epidemiology in Pakistan, the discursive construction of dengue in media narratives has received little scholarly attention.

Research Questions

How do Dawn and The Nation portray dengue as a public health crisis in Islamabad?

What ideologies influence media portrayals of governmental accountability and citizen agency?

Which voices are privileged or marginalized in dengue discourse?

How do identified discursive tendencies affect effective public health communication?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical discourse analysis has evolved as an effective tool for investigating how language shapes social reality, power dynamics, and ideological stances (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). Research on infectious illness coverage reveals "risk amplification" and "crisis framing" as dominating techniques during outbreaks, which can both encourage public action and cause fear (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). In underdeveloped countries, epidemic coverage frequently reinforces spatial hierarchies, with rural areas viewed as disease reservoirs that require external intervention (Dry & Leach, 2010).

There has been little research of health coverage in Pakistani media. Fatima et al. (2016) examined Pakistani newspaper coverage of the 2011 Punjab outbreak, revealing an emphasis on government failings but little attention paid to social causes. However, their content analysis approach did not analyze deeper discursive structures, a shortcoming that this study addresses using CDA methodology.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study's principal methodology is qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA), which follows Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice.

Data Collection

Corpus Selection:

Dawn: 10 articles (October 4 - November 17, 2025)

The Nation: 35 articles (September 3 - November 30, 2025)

Total Corpus: 45 articles comprising approximately 45,000 words Dawn, which is renowned for its independent editorial stance, was chosen as Pakistan's oldest and most globally

renowned English-language newspaper. A contrasting editorial stance, typically more in line with governmental

viewpoints, is represented by The Nation.

Analytical Framework

Four iterative stages of analysis were carried out:

(1) descriptive analysis, which lists topics and players; (2) linguistic analysis, which looks at terminology and metaphors; (3) intertextual analysis, which finds quoted sources and establishes authority; and (4) ideological analysis, which reveals underlying power relations.

The initial open coding identified 23 preliminary themes, structured through axial coding into seven key discursive categories: crisis framing, state accountability, public responsibility, scientific-technical discourse, geographical placement, temporal constructions, and enforcement discourse.

Limitations

The analysis is restricted to English-language media and concentrates on Islamabad. It might not be applicable to other Pakistani cities or audiences that speak Urdu.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Crisis and Emergency Framing

Dengue is constructed using crisis discourse in both publications. "Even floods and fierce monsoon spells were unable to convince the authorities to take timely precautions," Dawn said. Dengue has made a fierce comeback. (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1950297>). "High-risk dengue outbreak alert" and "emergency anti-dengue measures" are examples of the urgent language used by the nation. (<https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Sep-2025>).

The crisis frame conceals dengue's endemic nature, justifies intense monitoring, and legitimizes unprecedented state authority, among other ideological purposes. Discourse avoids focusing on long-term infrastructural shortcomings by portraying outbreaks as extraordinary occurrences. By presenting the disaster as preventable and attributing responsibility to administrative error, Dawn critically uses crisis framing to draw attention to governmental incompetence. In order to justify extensive state engagement, the country used crisis framing to portray governmental action as suitable in emergency situations.

State Responsibility and Bureaucratic Action

Publications about governmental accountability are fundamentally divided in terms of discourse. The government is always portrayed by Dawn as being reactive: "A rusty healthcare system is clogged with patients suffering from the seasonal menace"

(<https://www.dawn.com/news/1950297>). Dawn carefully uses the passive voice to draw attention to the inaction of the government. According to the Nation, the government is actively involved: "The district administration has intensified its dengue prevention operations, inspecting over 30,000 sites"

(<https://www.nation.com.pk/03-Nov-2025>).

The image of thorough activity is created by extensive quantification, such as "25,019

inspections," "1,025 fogging operations" (<https://www.nation.com.pk/26-Nov-2025>).

A lot of bureaucratic terminology is used in both papers, such as "Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)," "surveillance teams," and "response protocols." By portraying dengue control as essentially technical rather than political, this technical-administrative discourse establishes institutional legitimacy while possibly separating laypeople from professional management.

Public Responsibility and Citizen Duty

In both publications, citizens are shown as both responsible and vulnerable groups. "District Health Office Islamabad has urged the public to follow preventive measures, particularly regular cleaning of water containers, tanks, and coolers" (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1948252>), according to Dawn. In particular, the Nation uses moral discourse, saying that "scholars should use pulpits and mihrabs to draw attention to the Islamic teaching that 'cleanliness is half of faith'" (<https://www.nation.com.pk/09-Nov-2025>).

According to opinion writer Attiya Munawer, "the government cannot achieve anything without public support"

(<https://www.nation.com.pk/09-Nov-2025>).

The following citizens are susceptible to legal action: "38 people were arrested for breaching standard operating procedures (SOPs)" (<https://www.nation.com.pk/07-Oct-2025>).

Constraints are contextualized by Dawn: "water shortage forced people to preserve water in uncovered tanks creating an ideal breeding ground to dengue mosquitoes" (<https://www.dawn.com/news/194177>).

Neoliberal governance patterns, which portray citizens as self-managing subjects in charge of their own health, are reflected in this language shift from structural to individual accountability. Discourse may depoliticize dengue control by prioritizing individual conduct over the provision of infrastructure.

Geographic and Socioeconomic Discourse Rural-urban case distributions are consistently reported in both publications: "out of 26 cases, 14 were reported from rural areas and 12 from urban areas" (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1948252>). With rural areas serving as disease reservoirs, this enduring classification creates a presumed geographical hierarchy.

The highly populated Bara Kahu in Islamabad has become a high risk area for dengue, with 293 cases reported so far this year"

(<https://www.dawn.com/news/1946382>) is one example of an area that has been consistently identified as a

hotspot. On occasion, Dawn contextualizes geographical trends by pointing out that restricted areas "failed to clear nullahs during monsoon"

(<https://www.dawn.com/news/1941777>). The nation publishes geographic distributions in a more direct manner without critically analyzing why some places are more affected than others. Both articles avoid using explicit class analysis. There is no mention of variations in housing quality, work patterns, healthcare access, or the ability to implement preventive measures. This silence on class could conceal how dengue disproportionately impacts poorer areas.

Temporal Discourse

Dawn uses historical contextualization: "Since 1994, there have been numerous dengue epidemics in Pakistan, with significant outbreaks documented in 2005, 2011, and 2019. In 2005, Karachi recorded about 6,000 dengue cases with 52 fatalities; in 2011, Lahore reported over 21,000 cases with 350 fatalities" (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1941777>).

By establishing patterns of recurrent crises, historical framing subtly raises the question of why lessons aren't learned. The Nation highlights current initiatives: "in the past 24 hours" and plans for the future: "The administration aims to declare Islamabad a dengue-free zone" (<https://www.nation.com.pk/26-Nov-2025>). This present-future perspective creates a narrative of progress and places an emphasis on prompt government action. According to Dawn, dengue temporality reveals systemic breakdown through repeated annual repeating. The nation uses cumulative administrative effort to create a simpler sequential progress toward eradication.

Enforcement and Surveillance

Extensive surveillance is documented in both publications: "teams inspected 42,734 sites and conducted fogging at 1,559 high-risk locations during the past 24 hours" (<https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Nov-2025>).

"22,438 spots across the city in a single day to check for larvae, stagnant water and possible breeding points" is highlighted by the Nation (<https://www.nation.com.pk/30-Nov-2025>).

Punitive framing is common; people are detained and properties are shut for "negligence." The "zero-tolerance policy against dengue risks" is upheld by the administration (<https://www.nation.com.pk/26-Nov-2025>).

This discourse on surveillance is a reflection of biopower, in which population health is managed

by the state. Discussions of citizen rights in relation to residential inspections, due process in enforcement operations, or appeals procedures are conspicuously lacking.

In the absence of strong accountability systems, this silence legitimizes the state's right to enter homes and penalize noncompliance.

Silences and Marginalizations

Voices Not Heard:

Community-based organizations are not acknowledged

The affected residents are rarely directly quoted

Dengue patients are rarely focused

The financial burden on families is not recorded
The healthcare personnel using spraying are not interviewed

Issues Underexplored:

There is little discussion of budget allocations or the differences between public and private healthcare

Water infrastructure challenges are acknowledged but not examined (why shortages require hazardous storage)

Climate change is only mentioned briefly despite PMD warnings regarding temperature thresholds.

There are no gender dimensions at all

These silences are a reflection of the biomedical dominance that marginalizes social determinants of health, the elite media's focus on educated, urban viewers, event-driven journalism that precludes structural analysis, and source dependence on authorities that creates bias.

DISCUSSION

Comparative Ideological Analysis

Dimension	Dawn	The Nation
State Relationship	Adversarial watchdog	Collaborative partner
Primary Function	Accountability	Information dissemination
Critique Level	Systemic issues	Operational focus
Historical Depth	Extensive	Present-focused
Solutions	Structural reform	Administrative efficiency

Recommendations

For Media Organizations:

Frame "negligence" within material restrictions to balance individual and systemic framing
Diversify sources to include community people, patients, and healthcare professionals
Maintain attention beyond peak season with ongoing coverage
Emphasize community-level solutions; decrease technical jargon; increase Urdu language proficiency

For Federal Ministry of Health:

Acknowledge socioeconomic limitations on behavior change
Shift from top-down instructions to participatory communication
Frame messaging around community empowerment rather than surveillance
Make it easier for journalists to access a variety of sources.
Discuss the necessity for infrastructure investments in public.

For Future Research:

Examine how communities receive and interpret media messages
Compare English and Urdu newspaper coverage
Examine social media and television discourse
Perform longitudinal analysis across several seasons.
Incorporate political economy research.

CONCLUSION

The dengue coverage in Dawn and The Nation creates complex narratives where public duty, scientific knowledge, and official authority converge, according to this critical discourse study. While The Nation supports official administrative narratives, Dawn continues to take a critical posture that questions institutional failings. Both publications function within discursive frameworks that prioritize the opinions of experts, place a strong emphasis on personal behavior modification, and predominantly portray citizens as objects of monitoring. Despite massive efforts, there are still a lot of dengue cases, which implies that the efficiency of current communication tactics is limited by conceptual frameworks.

Dengue control may be prevented from being framed as an environmental justice issue, a result of development patterns, or a problem requiring community-led solutions by the dominant discourse, which primarily constructs dengue control as a technical-administrative challenge requiring expert management and individual compliance.

A fundamental reassessment of who speaks, whose knowledge matters, and how health issues are seen is necessary for effective public health communication: Political change from individual accountability to group accountability; epistemic change from expert-dominated to participatory knowledge; and communication change from top-down transmission to dialogic participation; and a change in time from crisis management to long-term system improvement.

Developing more inclusive, equity-focused, and politically informed public health communication is a practical necessity for safeguarding population health, especially for vulnerable communities bearing disproportionate disease burdens, as Pakistan's urbanization pressures and rising climate volatility intensify dengue challenges.

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