
Ahmed Mansoori
Muhammed Musa

Arabic narratives: A study of Gulf Press coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic

Popular discourses about the interconnectedness of the world tend to focus on the movements of goods and capital across national borders and, consequently, this perspective tends to dominate analyses and understanding of globalisation. From February 2020 to date, however, the Covid-19 pandemic that engulfed the world has taken centre stage and is reshaping perspectives on the discourse about the interconnectedness of the world. From legacy to social media, there is no topic as prominent as Covid-19. The same borderlessness of the world that eased movements of goods and capital has enabled free movement of illnesses and pandemics in a way that brings back the searchlight on previous mythologies about globalisation. This paper employs content analysis in studying trends and patterns of Arabic Gulf Press coverage of the pandemic. In particular, the paper aims to provide insight into why, even though the five Gulf countries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE) share similar political and cultural identities rooted in Arab and Islamic values, profound differences in inclinations emerge in both the patterns and trends of their coverage of Covid-19. The economically endowed Al Ittihad, of the UAE, epitomises the mainstream, conformist reporting culture of Gulf Press while Alrai of Kuwait stands out as an outlier in a unique culture of interrogation of issues not often seen among most newspapers in the region.

Key words: Arabic Gulf press, Covid-19, content analysis, cultural identities

The globalisation of contemporary illnesses

If myth is understood as a way of understanding or interpreting sets of ideas about world history, events, society and culture including the process of its production then we can see that it is not value free.

That informs why in her classic critique of globalisation Marjorie Ferguson (1999) attempted to unpack the dominant notion of globalisation as a myth predicated on capitalist modernity and its desire for market expansion. All other supportive policies that would create the enabling environment for such expansion and creation of markets such as deregulation, competition, economic and political liberalisation etc are propagated as beneficial to everyone. The obvious power relations inherent in the globalisation project are obfuscated in the classifying narrative and consequently it is exposed as mere myth.

The mythologising narrative of globalisation propagates trade liberalisation and market expansion that would lead to capital flight. Such capital flight, as the argument goes, will impact on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of nation states so that there will be increased income for the poor and improved health facilities in countries of the world (see Swende et al. 2008; Jani et al. 2019; Woodward 2001; Dollar and Kraay 2004). Jani et al. summarised the trickle-down effect impact of globalisation by observing that:

Increased GDP may also result in higher tax revenues and hence more resources for government. The higher disposable income may result in higher spending on nutrition and healthcare, which would result in better personal health levels. At the same time, increased resources with the government would result in better health across the country (2019: 211).

Nearly four decades since the ascendancy of the neo-liberal market system as a global social order the reality that has unfolded confirms Ferguson's description of the earlier narrative as a myth. The asymmetrical power relation in the globalisation project is evident as countries of the South remain at the margins. The new international division of labour that accompanied neo-liberal globalisation only turned their countries into locations for production of finished luxury goods sold in centres of global capital. Their countries are attractive for such production because of a cheap and de-unionised labour force. In addition, contrary to the mythology that globalisation has raised the GDP of countries and, therefore, additional investment in the health sector, the opposite unfolded in most countries in the neo-liberal globalisation orbit. Privatisation of social services including health, cuts in government spending in the sector and imposition of user fees have actually left citizens in most countries worse off. The speed of the modern transport system enabled by the removal of boundaries as part of deregulation policies has meant that infections and disease are also easily transported around the world within a short time as was seen with the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), in 2002-2009, the avian flu virus and now Covid-19.

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The policy of de-regulation that brought about the globalisation of the market social order has extended to the media sector. The global media have become channels for exporting and propagating lifestyles that promotes that social order. Development in technology that brought about internet and social media has expanded the channels for the advertising and marketing of consumer goods and lifestyle in a lopsided way, from centres of global capital to the rest of the world. One of the outcomes is the globalisation of lifestyle ailments such as obesity and diabetes. Similarly, according to Lee:

The shift in the tobacco pandemic to the developing world has been clearly driven by the tobacco industry. It is estimated that, by 2030, 70% of all tobacco-related deaths (7 million annually) will occur in developing countries (Lee 2004: 157).

That Covid-19, which started in the city of Wuhan in China has, within three months of its manifestation, been exported and domesticated in almost every country of the world must be understood in the context of the very features of neo-liberal globalisation such as de-regulation and opened borders, fast and unhindered transportation of goods and services etc. As a result, what started as a health crisis has assumed pandemic proportions impacting on economy and society in a way that was not seen since the Great Depression.

The press in the Gulf region like their counterparts in the rest of the world have dwelt on the coverage of the pandemic as it relates especially to their individual countries. Even though the Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE) share common cultural values such as language, religion, fashion, food and music, press coverage of Covid-19 pandemic manifests some differences in trends and patterns. All these Arab states of the Gulf have relied on exports of global commodities, namely oil and gas, as well as tourism as the bedrock of their economies that made them among world's richest countries. Sales and demand for the precious commodities have been negatively affected since the outbreak of Covid-19 as industries and transport, including airplanes, have been grounded while tourists have stayed away as world airports have shut down.

The Gulf press: Insight into media development

What is known as the Gulf press (newspapers of the countries of the Gulf) is a development of the twentieth century starting in 1908 in the countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain and spreading to Oman, Qatar and the UAE in the early 1960s-1970s. Both the increase in literacy and development in printing and publishing technology facilitated a rapid rise in the number of published newspapers at the end of the twentieth century. By 2002

it is said that KSA alone had 176 news publications, Kuwait had 80, UAE had 72, Oman had 27 and Bahrain and Qatar 22 each. Arabic has been the dominant language of newspapers in the Gulf even though each of the six countries making up the Cooperation for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) now has influential newspapers published in English either as a sister publication of the main Arabic language paper or as a stand-alone independent publication.

Modern journalism in the Gulf is said to have gone through four phases. The first, pioneer, phase started with the birth of the *Journal of Kuwait* in 1929, only for the paper to move to Bahrain a year later. By 1929 a second paper called *Al-Bahrain* was launched and was especially noted for its voice in support of the United Kingdom against Nazi Germany (Al-Jaber and Gunther 2013).

The second phase, 1949-56, saw the emergence of several newspapers and magazines across the countries of the Gulf but especially in Bahrain. It was a period characterised by a rise in literacy and educational activities generally. The *Voice of Bahrain* was especially noted for recruiting highly educated writers who produced quality journalism that impacted on society by their commentary on issues of the day.

The third phase in the development of print news was the 1990s when print journalism was challenged by satellite television but especially the Cable News Network (CNN) and its coverage of the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq (Hachten and Scotton 2012; Sakr 2006). There are two crucial implications of this development for newspaper journalism in the Gulf. First, it gave journalists, but especially citizens, an insight into and awareness of the important role private media could play when they are detached from state ownership that has been the norm in the region. Second, it provided governments in the region, especially KSA, a pragmatic understanding of the need to re-think current state media monopoly in a way that would match the country's ambition and desire to tell its story to the world in a credible fashion. Such new awareness and consideration, according to Al-Jaber and Gunther, 'resulted in the spread of international Arab press and the emergence of celebrity newsmen whose views influenced the public opinion locally and abroad' (2013: 24).

In spite of such claims, though, Al-Jaber and Gunther have cited Freedom House (2009) to indicate that Kuwait ranked as first in the Gulf region in terms of freedom granted to the press and second among all Arab countries. We would note that the relative freedom of the Kuwaiti press is underpinned by the fact that the country has a more robust and, therefore, advanced political culture than most other countries in the region (Sager 2006; Parolin 2006). The country has a parliament of elected representatives that formulate policy for the monarchy.

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The Reporters Without Borders annual report for 2009, which summarizes the nature of the media in different countries, indicated that there were signs of evolution in freedom of the press in the Arabian Gulf region, but noted that the GCC states still have a long way to go (Al-Jaber and Gunther 2013: 25).

The fourth phase in the development of the press in the Gulf region is most largely technology-driven and starts with the arrival of broadband internet from 2005 to the present. The Gulf countries rank among those with the highest internet penetration in the world with Oman being the lowest at 78.5 per cent and the rest all well above 90 per cent. This situation has provided citizens in the region an opportunity to become active participants in news making and it also poses a challenge to state control of the media. The outcome is, among others, that most newspapers embraced convergence of their newsrooms and created online versions of their publications.

Arabic narratives on Covid-19

Like all other countries in the world, the Arab countries of the Gulf have not been spared the spread of Covid-19 and its devastating impact on economy and society. Consequently, Covid-19 has become a prominent story and subject of commentary in all newspapers across the region. Through a content analysis of the leading Arabic language newspapers in each country in the GCC, this study has attempted to gain insight into trends and patterns of coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study selected five newspapers: *Alittihad* in the UAE, *Akhbar-Alkhallej* in Bahrain, *Aljazeera* in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Alrai* in Kuwait, and *Oman* in the Sultanate of Oman. Even though Qatar is among the GCC countries, the current blockade imposed on it by the remaining GCC members has made it impossible for us to access any newspaper from the country. The study has analysed 14 copies of each newspaper from the month of April to July 2020. This period falls within the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the region.

The content analysis points to interesting trends and patterns in the coverage of Covid-19 among the Arabic language newspapers in the five countries. For instance, *Alittihad* of the UAE leads all others in terms of number of hard news items, with about 297 stories. Others are not too far behind: *Alrai* has 232, *Oman* has 193 and *Akhbar* of Bahrain has 187. *Aljazeera* of KSA has the lowest number of hard stories with 101 (Table 1). An explanation for this pattern has to do with the extent of media development as well as the economics of the newspaper organisations in these countries. *Alittihad*, as a local newspaper, gives a lot of attention to local issues and initiatives. At the same time, it is very well resourced so that it can also afford to source news from overseas about the pandemic. The paper is bigger than all other newspapers in the region at 32-

40 pages per issue. This accords it space to cover issues in a way other papers in the region cannot. The other papers have between 16-24 pages per issue. Generally, newspapers in the region have downsized editorial staff in the period before the pandemic but during the pandemic many experienced further downsizing as reporters were working remotely and others were laid off. *Alittihad* enjoyed more reportorial resources than the rest even at the time of the pandemic.

Another factor that explains the lower number of hard news items from *Aljazeera* of KSA is that it has established a reputation for publishing more opinion pieces than hard news.

Table 1. Number of hard news items about Covid-19 published in each newspaper

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	297	187	101	232	193	1010
Average ¹	21.214	13.36	7.214	16.571	13.785	14.4288

The study also tried to establish if newspaper content was simply mundane accounts of rates of infection at home and abroad or attempted to create awareness and educate the public on prevention procedures such as use of hand sanitisers, social distancing, wearing of face mask, isolation and lockdown etc. Newspapers from KSA, UAE and Oman account for the biggest number of stories in that area with 24, 18 and 14 respectively. Both Bahrain and Kuwait had fewer than 10 awareness and prevention stories each.

In terms of population, KSA has 40 million people, UAE 12 million and Oman about 5 million, while Bahrain and Kuwait are city states with just about a million people each. Clearly, the bigger the population the bigger also the social responsibility on newspapers to create awareness. Generally, the awareness content in *Aljazirah* from KSA was in opinion columns and articles, compared to *Alittihad* in the UAE and *Oman* where they were mainly in features and news reports (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of news content that aims to create awareness and prevention procedures of Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	18	9	24	3	14	68
Average	1.28	0.643	1.714	0.214	1	0.9702

In terms of opinion articles related to Covid-19, *Aljazirah* had the biggest number (105), while newspapers in UAE and Bahrain are second and third with 63 and 58 (Table 3). It is thus clear that *Aljazeera* of KSA leads in creating a public sphere for the

expression of views and opinions on Covid-19. This reflects the high proportion (about 40 per cent) of opinion articles and columns in the newspaper.

Table 3. Number of opinion articles related to Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	63	58	105	27	27	280
Average	4.5	4.143	7.5	1.928	1.928	3.9998

The newspapers in UAE, Oman and Kuwait are the top three in terms of number of feature stories and in-depth reports related to Covid-19 with 27, 25, and 23 respectively, while KSA is fourth with 17 and, again, Bahrain the least with only 14 items (Table 4). It is possible that *Alittihad*, which is the biggest and best resourced newspaper, tends to deploy multiple reporting practices. *Aljazirah* and *Akhbar Alkhaleej* are small in terms of size and resources.

Table 4. Number of feature stories and in-depth reports published about Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	27	14	17	23	25	106
Average	1.928	1	1.214	1.642	1.785	2.2

The UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain newspapers cite state officials and world leaders as major sources of stories (72, 43 and 42 stories respectively; Table 5).² A possible explanation to this is that *Alittihad* is a government-owned newspaper and sees part of its role as to publicise the initiatives of government officials in covering the pandemic. Another possible reason is that *Alittihad*, due to its larger size, has more space that needs to be filled up. Consequently, it finds it convenient to resort to official sources at home and abroad. *Oman* and *Aljazirah* cited officials and world leaders the least, with 22 items each. *Oman* newspaper often combines all international stories about Covid-19 in one big piece with a headline. *Aljazirah*, as mentioned before, is more focused on local opinion pieces.

Table 5. Number of state officials and world leaders mentioned as major sources of information

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	73	42	22	46	22	205
Average	5.214	3	1.571	3.285	1.571	2.9282

Scientists are cited as major sources of news on Covid-19 by newspapers from UAE with 34, Oman with 22 and Bahrain with 20 (Table 6). Newspapers from Kuwait and KSA cite scientists least with 13 and 7 respectively. The closest ally of the United States in the

Gulf region is KSA and to the extent that the current US leadership is also not the strongest advocate of scientific wisdom on Covid-19, we could see a semblance of international political alliance playing out here. *Alittihad*, which leads the other newspapers in terms of the number of hard news, features and in-depth-reports, also leads other papers in terms of citing experts and scientists as the major source of information.

Table 6. Number of scientists and experts mentioned as major sources of information

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	34	20	6	13	21	94
Average	2.428	1.492	0.428	0.928	1.5	1.342

Three of the newspapers contained criticism of the World Health Organisation (Table 7). The United States government has been the strongest critic of WHO to the extent that it pulled out of the world body and withdrew its financial contribution that is needed to fund global research towards the invention of a vaccine against Covid-19. Even though UAE and KSA newspapers appear to be critics of WHO, the number of stories are not significant enough to make direct allusion to the political alliance between the Gulf countries and the United States on the matter relating to the organisation. Moreover, *Alittihad* and *Aljazeera's* criticism of WHO appeared exclusively in opinion articles.

Table 7. Number of articles or news items that criticize role of WHO on Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	3	0	2	1	0	6
Average	0.214	0	0.14	0.071	0	0.085

Alrai of Kuwait is the only newspaper from the study with entries criticising the role of local governments on Covid-19, while the other papers have no entries at all (Table 8). This could relate to the existence of a more developed political culture in the country. First, Kuwait has an elected parliament that is known for robust debates on issues. Kuwait ranked 109 in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (<https://rsf.org/en/kuwait>), leading the other GCC countries which rank 130 and higher. *Alrai* belongs to a private enterprise (Alrai Media Group) which gives it more liberty compared to the other papers which are government-owned or owned by elites close to the government.

Table 8. Number of articles or news that criticize the role of the local government on Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	0	0	0	5	0	5
Average	0	0	0	0.357	0	0.1142

Conclusion

Since this first case of Covid-19 was reported in Wuhan, China, in February 2020 the virus has travelled the length and breadth of this world and assumed a pandemic proportion. The devastation Covid-19 has unleashed on nations means that what started as a health crisis has now extended to all sectors of society. In times such as these media are arguably more important as sources of news. This study has looked at the coverage of the Covid-19 by Arabic language newspapers of the Gulf countries. The countries are differently endowed in terms of both media development and political culture. In addition, the Gulf countries, even though they share similar cultural values, adopt different stands on some regional and international issues. All these factors shape differences in the newspapers' narratives on Covid-19.

Coming from a region that is economically endowed has meant that Arabic language newspapers in the Gulf have more funds at their disposal than their counterparts outside the region even at a time of turbulence experienced by the industry globally. This has reflected on their differential capacities in reporting hard news on Covid-19. But even among them, *Al Ittihad* of the UAE has a bigger financial muscle than the rest and, consequently, is bigger in size and number of pages as well as personnel. As a result, the newspaper is able to report more hard news than the rest which rely on opinion pieces. But even in its hard news coverage, *Al Ittihad*, as a policy, avoids asking strong critical questions that challenge the status quo at home and internationally.

Notes

¹ Average number of articles per day

² Note that we have only considered one major source per story in the analysis

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Note on the contributors

Ahmed Mansoori is the current Chair of the Department of Media and Creative Industries at United Arab Emirates University. His teaching and research interests are in journalism studies, media convergence, media and society as well as media development in the Gulf region.

Muhammed Musa joined the United Arab Emirates University from the University of Canterbury in 2014. His research interests in which he has published widely are in political economy of the media, media and social change in Africa, media and sports and new media and political developments in Africa.