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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Psychiatry Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/psychres

Letter to the Editor

Role of electronic media in mitigating the psychological impacts of novel coronavirus (COVID-19)



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

COVID-19
Media
Mental health

ABSTRACT

The current research initiative focuses on the role of Pakistani media in eliminating panic and depression among health practitioners and the general public due to the outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In Pakistan, electronic media is the most common source of information due to the higher rural population and the lower literacy rate and media's handling of COVID-19 coverage so far creates panic and depression. We suggest that special televised transmissions featuring psychologists and psychiatrists should be aired to reduce the panic. Media also mitigates the stress of frontline medical staff by paying special attributes to them.

Dear Editor

During times of public crises, media must ensure to communicate crisis information efficiently and effectively to the general public, failing to do so will certainly lead to uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. In this era of advancement and technology with the general acceptance for freedom of speech, the role of media becomes indispensable in every respect. As today the world is suffering from ongoing novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, fear of getting infected is sweeping all over the globe. In this context, some sources may be of dire help and play their part in reducing the panic that has been caused due to an increase in the mortality rate all over the globe (Wit et al., 2011). Media is the most powerful tool that can disseminate such campaigns to provide some relief from panic and boost the morale of the general public. There is a general acceptance of the fact that electronic and print media in South Asia are politically biased and tend to exploit scenarios like the current situation to win media wars. This is why we should focus on the role media to help reduce anxiety levels in the general public. History shows that there is a direct link between media and society. The basic motive of media is to inform society and to work for social welfare at a massive level as it targets the mass population. This particular study aims to study the role of Pakistani media in reducing the mental stress of the public and enhancing the motivation level of the healthcare service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of media concerning COVID-19 is quite disappointing. Pakistan's electronic media and famous talk shows are covering the news about COVID-19. However, often the news or transmissions are without medical experts. In the famous shows or programs, senior journalists or rival politicians are invited as experts for a discussion on COVID-19 outbreak, who just argue with other participants or with journalists to boost ratings. Also, on a number of occasions, the row between opposite political leaders led to a discussion being turned towards the general public instead of a discussion about the COVID-19 pandemic. No special programs are being aired to inform, encourage, or to motivate the general public's morale and mitigate their mental stress in this global emergency. Only some short messages are being aired with very little duration (e.g., 30 seconds or 1 minute) and also not on peak time. Another aspect to consider is that televised transmissions

often use horrifying words and deadly vocabulary. News disseminate more talks about death and disappointments than about life and hope as it seems that there is a jungle of deaths and more and more deaths are coming soon. Instead of providing encouragement, the media is spreading fear and stress.

Current televised transmissions have led the general public to believe the COVID-19 pandemic and the mental health issues are not hot issues for Pakistani media. They can organize campaigns for every festival but not for a pandemic that has the potential to affect almost one-third part of the world population (Bhutta et al., 2020).

Pakistani electronic media covers all festivals and social events by organizing various campaigns as the Pakistani public relies much on media for getting information about everything. For instance, special coverage of festivals such as Holy month Ramadan transmissions, Eid transmissions, Valentine's Day celebrations, sports coverage and so on are organized to boost enthusiasm and passion in the public. Special songs are sung for sporting events such as the World Cup and Pakistan Super League (PSL) to create public interest. On national days like 14th August Independence Day, defense day, etc. national songs strengthen the patriotism. Even in the case of regional armed conflicts e.g., 1965 and 1971 national songs played by media-inspired people to get ready to fight in the wars.

With the entertainment section of the media ongoing without any disruption, there is a general consensus that in this period of anxiety, entertainment is needed but what about the productive role of media to inform people about mental wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). Media campaigns in Pakistan need to address the mental health of the public and there is a great need for special transmissions with health professionals and experts to provide advice and instructions for the public to cope with the current situation (Ali & Gatiti, 2020). Pakistani media generally enjoys broadcasting freedom and has a strong impact on the day-to-day life of the general public. The current situation demands that they should play a positive role in this critical condition for the well-being of the general public. Psychologists, psychiatrists and healthcare professionals should be invited in the programs to guide the people about the COVID-19 with the aim to console and advise the general public on how to avoid stress so that they can cope with this deadly condition without affecting their

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113041>

Received 15 April 2020; Received in revised form 25 April 2020; Accepted 25 April 2020

Available online 29 April 2020

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mental health. Special televised campaigns aimed to boost the morale of the public should be given air time (Bhatia, 2018).

Another dilemma of the current situation is the absence of schooling of children. Children are at home and are moved with the situation. The media is not on-airing any productive program for children which shows that Pakistani media is only limited to just one age group in society. What about children who are the future of our society and are already suffering from boredom and depression during the current situation, therefore media should play its role in arranging some special programs aimed at promoting learning activities for children and it will be beneficial for the mental and physical developments of these children who are the future of Pakistan.

Another hapless factor is the dilemma of the dispersion of false information from the media. Televised transmissions are not fact-checked and are being aired with the single aim to become the number one media outlet and win the ratings war. This race is so hostile to the general public that educated people have a credibility issue with media. It is so unfortunate that you live in such a vibrant country and yet you can't rely on the news delivered by the mainstream media.

Televised sessions with people who have recovered from the disease may help the people to relieve themselves from stress, anxiety, and fear of death. It is a national and international dilemma that will have to be faced with courage, cooperation, and patience. Everyone has to play his/her role in this global pandemic. Media is a powerful weapon that can be used to help the public get motivated in these times of hopelessness and helplessness. Messages of help and guidance should be on- aired. Unity is the need of the hour so emotional songs to unite people may be a great help if they are arranged appropriately. The politicians and journalists should understand that this is not the time for argumentation and fighting rather it's the time to unite the nation so that

this war against COVID-19 would be won with heads held high.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113041](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113041).

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