Voices the World Failed to Hear: Media Frames, Transnational Memory, and the Politics of Humanitarian Narratives in Global Crisis Coverage

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of journalistic frames in constructing transnational memory and moral authority in the global coverage of Rohingya displacement between 2016 and 2023. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of nine English-language outlets across three world regions, the study identifies four dominant narrative frames—moral urgency, victimization, civilizational threat, and geopolitical interest—and argues that each produces a distinct political reality with measurable consequences for humanitarian response. The analysis reveals profound asymmetries in global narrative power: Western frames circulate transnationally while Rohingya voices and Southeast Asian perspectives remain structurally marginalised. The paper introduces the concept of narrative infrastructure to theorise the durable discursive structures that render certain crises narratable and certain solutions conceivable. This concept bridges media theory and International Relations, reframing journalism not as an observer of global politics but as an actor constitutive of it. The findings carry implications for media practitioners, humanitarian organisations, and scholars of forced displacement, genocide studies, and the political economy of global communication.

Keywords: framing analysis, Rohingya, transnational memory, humanitarian communication, narrative infrastructure, critical discourse analysis, media and human rights

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Introduction

When the military offensive against the Rohingya population of Rakhine State began in August 2017, international media attention surged with an intensity that briefly rendered the crisis legible to a global public. Within weeks, however, that attention had already begun to recede—following the predictable rhythm of what Moeller (1999) termed "compassion fatigue," the structural tendency of news cycles to exhaust moral responses precisely as crises deepen. By 2020, as hundreds of thousands of Rohingya remained confined to the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, their story had largely vanished from the front pages of the same outlets that had once called them "the most persecuted people in the world" (United Nations, 2013).

This paper begins from the premise that the problem is not merely one of journalistic negligence or limited attention spans. It is, rather, structural and systemic. The media do not simply report crises—they construct them discursively, determining which populations become visible as victims, which actors acquire moral authority, and which political responses appear feasible. These determinations are not neutral. They reflect, and in turn reproduce, the geopolitical hierarchies that shape international humanitarian and legal order. To analyse the coverage of Rohingya displacement is therefore to investigate a set of representational choices that carry political weight far beyond the text of any individual article.

The central research question guiding this study is: how do journalistic frames construct transnational memory and moral authority in the global coverage of Rohingya displacement? To address this question, the paper applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to a corpus of reporting published across nine English-language outlets spanning Asia, North America, and Europe between 2016 and 2023. Three critical junctures structure the temporal scope of the analysis: the August 2017 military offensive; the 2019 proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ); and the conditions in Cox's Bazar during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021.

The paper makes two principal contributions. First, it offers a systematic comparative cartography of the framing strategies employed across regional media systems, demonstrating that the same events are constituted as profoundly different crises depending on the site from which they are narrated. Second, it introduces the concept of narrative infrastructure—the durable, cross-cutting discursive structures that determine which stories can be told, which voices are granted credibility, and which futures are rendered imaginable. This concept, the paper argues, provides the theoretical tools necessary to understand why transformation of global crisis coverage requires not only better journalism but a restructuring of the conditions under which journalism is produced.

Theoretical Framework: Framing, Memory, and Symbolic Power

The analysis in this paper draws on three interconnected bodies of scholarship: framing theory as developed in communication studies; theories of collective and transnational memory; and Bourdieu's (1991) sociology of symbolic power.

Within communication studies, framing theory holds that news coverage does not neutrally transmit information but actively organises it by selecting, emphasising, and interpreting events through particular conceptual lenses (Entman, 1993). Frames are not simply rhetorical ornaments; they are cognitive scaffolds that shape how audiences understand causality, assign

responsibility, and evaluate possible responses. Gitlin's (1980) foundational work on media and social movements demonstrated that framing choices could effectively domesticate political challenges, rendering them legible in terms that foreclosed rather than opened transformative possibilities. Subsequent scholarship has applied and extended these insights to the coverage of humanitarian crises, refugee flows, and international conflict (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2009; Orgad, 2012), consistently finding that the representational choices made by journalists have measurable effects on public attitudes and, by extension, on the political conditions within which humanitarian response becomes possible or impossible.

The second theoretical resource is the literature on collective and transnational memory. Assmann and Conrad (2010) have argued that memory is never simply individual or national but is produced through circuits of communication that traverse borders and scales. In an era of globalised media, the repetitive coverage of particular events or populations contributes to the formation of what might be called a transnational moral archive—a shared repertoire of images, narratives, and moral judgments that informs how future crises are recognised and how the international community imagines its obligations. The Rohingya case is exemplary in this respect: the frameworks developed during earlier crises of forced displacement—above all, the post-Holocaust idiom of genocide—are invoked, contested, and strategically deployed in coverage, with significant consequences for the political and legal standing of the affected population.

The third theoretical resource is Bourdieu's (1991) account of symbolic power, understood as the power to constitute social reality through acts of naming and categorisation. Applied to journalism, this framework suggests that the media do not simply describe a pre-existing humanitarian reality but actively participate in producing it—conferring legitimacy on certain actors, rendering others invisible, and establishing the terms within which political action is understood as appropriate or conceivable. To speak of journalistic frames as exercises of symbolic power is not to impute conspiratorial intent to individual journalists; it is to insist that the cumulative effect of professional routines, editorial hierarchies, and source networks produces a structured distribution of narrative authority that systematically advantages certain perspectives over others.

These three frameworks converge in the concept this paper introduces: narrative infrastructure. By analogy with material infrastructure, narrative infrastructure refers to the underlying structures—institutional, discursive, and technological—that make certain stories expressible and others unsayable. Infrastructure, as scholars in science and technology studies have noted (Star & Ruhleder, 1996), typically becomes visible only when it breaks down; it otherwise functions as a naturalized background condition. Narrative infrastructure operates similarly: the conditions under which the Rohingya story has been told appear, to the journalists and audiences who consume them, as simply the shape of reality rather than as the product of contingent historical choices that could, in principle, be made differently.

Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological framework, drawing particularly on the analytical procedures developed by Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1998). CDA is suited to the present inquiry because it attends simultaneously to the linguistic texture of texts—lexical choices, syntactic structures, rhetorical strategies—and to the social conditions of their production and reception. Crucially, it understands discourse

not as a transparent medium of communication but as a site of ideological struggle in which particular representations of social reality are naturalised, contested, or suppressed.

The corpus was constructed through purposive sampling at three peak moments of media attention: the August 2017 offensive, the 2019 ICJ proceedings, and the 2020–2021 pandemic period in Cox's Bazar camps. This temporal structure was chosen deliberately to capture not only the initial surge of coverage but also the subsequent cycles of diminishing attention—cycles that are themselves a central object of analysis. Articles were selected from nine outlets across three regional clusters: in Asia, The Straits Times (Singapore), The Daily Star (Bangladesh), and The Irrawaddy (Myanmar-focused); in North America, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Al Jazeera English; in Europe, The Guardian, BBC News, and Deutsche Welle (DW).

The decision to focus exclusively on English-language press requires justification. English-language journalism is not, of course, the only journalism that matters—the local-language media of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the region produce their own accounts of the crisis with their own logics and consequences. However, English-language reporting occupies a structurally privileged position within the global humanitarian field: it is the press that reaches the international organisations, donor governments, and advocacy networks whose decisions have direct consequences for the Rohingya. To analyse how the crisis has been constituted in this register is therefore to analyse the discourse that most directly shapes the political conditions of humanitarian response.

Analytical attention was directed at four principal dimensions of each text: the lexical choices through which events and actors were named and categorised; the source hierarchies through which some voices were granted authority and others were marginalised or silenced; the rhetorical strategies through which particular framings were naturalised and alternatives were foreclosed; and the implicit ideological assumptions embedded in the texts' presuppositions and absences. Across these dimensions, the analysis traced the emergence and consolidation of what proved to be four dominant frames, each of which will be discussed in the following section.

Findings: Four Frames, Four Political Realities

The analysis reveals four dominant narrative frames structuring global English-language coverage of Rohingya displacement. While individual outlets draw on more than one frame, and while the relative prominence of frames shifts across the three analytical periods, these four configurations account for the overwhelming majority of the coverage examined.

Moral Urgency

The moral urgency frame was dominant in Western media following August 2017 and constituted the primary mode through which the crisis was introduced to a global public. Its characteristic features include extensive use of testimonial evidence, graphic or affectively charged visual imagery, quantitative data foregrounding the scale of suffering, and explicit invocations of international legal and moral norms—above all, the genocide framework codified in the 1948 UN Convention. In formal terms, this frame employs the resources of what Chouliaraki (2006) has called “emergency journalism”: a mode of reporting that constructs an urgent gap between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be, interpellating the reader as a moral subject capable of action.

The structural limitation of the moral urgency frame, however, is precisely its urgency. Its capacity to mobilise attention is inseparable from its temporal volatility: as the initial shock of the offensive gave way to the slower, less photogenic suffering of displacement, the frame's affective economy depended on ever-diminishing returns of novelty. By 2020, the same camps that had generated global headlines in 2017 were covered, when covered at all, in terms that had entirely evacuated the moral urgency that had once characterised their appearance in the news. The frame is structurally self-undermining: it succeeds in generating attention precisely by constructing the crisis as exceptional, and exceptionality is, by definition, unsustainable.

Victimization

The victimization frame was present across all regional media systems and proved particularly dominant in coverage oriented toward fundraising and humanitarian mobilisation. Its defining feature is the consistent representation of Rohingya individuals and communities as passive recipients of violence and aid—as bodies that suffer rather than as subjects that act, organise, or make political demands. The Rohingya appear in this frame as what Agamben (1998) would call "bare life": human beings reduced to biological existence, stripped of the political attributes that would render them legible as agents within international discourse.

The political cost of this frame is considerable. The Rohingya have, in fact, a rich history of political organisation, legal advocacy, and collective resistance. They have brought cases before international courts, produced sophisticated analyses of their situation, and articulated detailed demands for citizenship, repatriation, and accountability. None of this appears with any regularity in the coverage examined. When Rohingya individuals do appear as speakers rather than subjects, they are almost invariably quoted in the testimonial mode—narrating their suffering rather than making political arguments. The victimization frame thus produces a paradox that will be examined further below: the more visible the Rohingya become within global humanitarian discourse, the more thoroughly their political agency is erased.

Civilizational Threat

The civilizational threat frame, characteristic above all of Myanmar's state media but also present in segments of the Southeast Asian press, represents the Rohingya not as victims but as dangers. Within this frame, the crisis is constructed as a challenge to national security, territorial integrity, and cultural or religious homogeneity. The lexical register shifts markedly: where moral urgency and victimization frames employ the vocabulary of humanitarianism and international law, the civilizational threat frame draws on the vocabulary of security, invasion, and civilisational conflict. The term "Rohingya" itself—implying a distinct ethnic and historical identity rooted in the territory of Myanmar—was explicitly contested and frequently avoided in favour of the designation "Bengali," which framed the population as foreign infiltrators rather than indigenous inhabitants.

The analysis of this frame confirms what scholars of ethnic conflict and mass violence have long argued: that the discursive construction of a population as an existential threat to the social body is a precondition, not merely a consequence, of genocidal violence (Malkki, 1995; Straus, 2006). The civilizational threat frame is not, in this sense, a neutral description of how some media choose to cover the crisis; it is a constitutive element of the political conditions that enabled the violence to occur and that continue to obstruct durable solutions.

Geopolitical Interest

The geopolitical interest frame, prominent in foreign policy-oriented publications and in Southeast Asian media attentive to ASEAN dynamics, subordinates the question of Rohingya rights to the logics of interstate competition, regional order, and great-power rivalry. Within this frame, the crisis is significant primarily as a node in broader geopolitical configurations: China's strategic interests in Myanmar, the ASEAN principle of non-interference, the competition between Beijing and Western capitals for influence in the region. The Rohingya themselves are largely absent from the analytical frame, appearing only as a variable in equations whose real subjects are states and their interests.

This frame is analytically coherent on its own terms—the geopolitical dimensions of the crisis are real and consequential—but its effect is to displace the human rights question entirely. The ICJ proceedings, which in 2019 offered an opportunity for international legal accountability, were covered in this frame primarily as a site of diplomatic maneuvering rather than as a potential mechanism of justice. The Rohingya, once again, disappeared as relevant subjects.

Regional Asymmetries and the Structure of Global Narrative Power

The comparative analysis reveals that the four frames do not distribute evenly across regions but are clustered in ways that reflect and reproduce the hierarchies of the global media system. Western outlets—particularly those in North America and Europe—predominantly employed the moral urgency and victimization frames, with Al Jazeera English partially complicating this pattern through its greater attentiveness to political context and Rohingya voice. South Asian outlets, particularly The Daily Star, were primarily structured by what the analysis identifies as a burden and security frame—distinct from but related to the victimization frame in its foregrounding of the consequences of displacement for Bangladesh and India rather than the rights of the displaced. Southeast Asian outlets were largely structured by the geopolitical interest and ASEAN non-interference frames, while Myanmar's state media operated almost exclusively through the civilizational threat frame.

These regional concentrations have a consequence that extends beyond descriptive mapping: they determine which frames circulate globally and which remain localised. The international organisations, donor governments, and advocacy networks that shape humanitarian response are primarily located in Western contexts and primarily consume Western media. The moral urgency and victimization frames thus acquire a structural dominance in the global humanitarian field that is entirely disproportionate to the range of perspectives from which the crisis could be, and is, narrated. Rohingya political voices, the nuanced analyses produced by The Irrawaddy, the South Asian perspectives that complicate simple narratives of victimhood—these circulate only within their regional media systems, failing to penetrate the circuits of global narrative production.

This asymmetry is not the result of individual editorial decisions but of structural conditions: the concentration of global wire services in Western cities; the economic and institutional resources that allow outlets like The New York Times and The Guardian to maintain correspondents in the region; the linguistic dynamics of English as the dominant language of international institutions; and the deep-rooted habits of source selection that privilege established interlocutors—UN spokespersons, NGO communications officers, Western government officials—over the political representatives of affected communities. To transform

this asymmetry would require not better intentions on the part of individual journalists but structural changes to the narrative infrastructure within which journalism is produced.

The Paradox of the Visible Victim

The most theoretically significant finding of this analysis concerns what might be called the paradox of the visible victim. The victimization frame, as noted above, is not without effect: it has generated genuine solidarity, substantial humanitarian funding, and the political conditions for legal proceedings before the ICJ. It would be reductive and inaccurate to dismiss it as merely ideologically distorting. Yet its effects are systematically double-edged. The price of visibility within the humanitarian field is the erasure of political subjectivity. To be recognisable as a victim deserving compassion, the Rohingya must appear within a representational framework that forecloses precisely the political claims—to citizenship, to sovereignty, to accountability—that a durable resolution of their situation would require.

This paradox is not unique to the Rohingya case. Chouliaraki (2013) has theorised it as a constitutive feature of what she calls "post-humanitarianism": a mode of moral engagement that emphasises individual emotional response over collective political action, and that consequently depoliticises the structural conditions it claims to address. The humanitarian frame, in this analysis, functions not as a challenge to the international order that produced the Rohingya crisis but as a mechanism for its management—a way of responding to the symptoms of a political pathology without addressing its causes.

The implications for advocacy and communication strategy are significant. Organisations seeking to generate and sustain public engagement with the Rohingya crisis face a structural dilemma: the communicative strategies most effective at generating immediate attention—testimonial narratives, affective imagery, quantitative evocations of scale—are precisely those that most thoroughly depoliticise the crisis and most thoroughly marginalise Rohingya political voice. A communication strategy adequate to the demands of justice would require developing new repertoires of representation that can render Rohingya political agency legible within global media circuits—a transformation that is, as the preceding analysis suggests, as much a matter of structural change as of individual choice.

Narrative Infrastructure as Theoretical Contribution

The concept of narrative infrastructure, as developed in this paper, offers a contribution to the interdisciplinary field connecting media studies and International Relations. The mainstream IR literature has tended to treat media as a contextual factor—an element of the environment within which states and other actors pursue their interests—rather than as a constitutive element of the international political order itself. Constructivist IR theory has opened space for attending to the role of ideas, norms, and discourse in shaping international outcomes (Wendt, 1999), but it has rarely engaged systematically with the institutional structures of global media production.

The concept of narrative infrastructure bridges this gap by insisting that the media are not merely conduits for ideas that originate elsewhere but active participants in the production of the normative frameworks within which international politics operates. Frames do not simply influence states—they constitute the terms within which state action is understood as legitimate, appropriate, or necessary. The framing of the Rohingya crisis as one of moral urgency, rather than of genocide, has direct implications for the legal and political obligations that attach to

international actors; the framing of the crisis through the geopolitical interest lens has direct implications for which multilateral responses appear feasible. These are not merely interpretive differences; they are productive of different political realities.

Narrative infrastructure, moreover, captures something that more static concepts of framing tend to miss: the temporal and institutional durability of discursive structures. Individual frames are applied and discarded; narrative infrastructure persists. It structures the conditions within which individual framing decisions are made, setting the parameters of what is sayable, credible, and consequential. To study narrative infrastructure is therefore to study not only what is said but the conditions of possibility of saying—the institutional sediments, professional norms, and geopolitical hierarchies that make certain representations natural and others unthinkable.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the global English-language coverage of Rohingya displacement is structured by four dominant narrative frames—moral urgency, victimization, civilizational threat, and geopolitical interest—whose distribution across regional media systems reflects and reproduces the hierarchies of the global political order. The analysis has demonstrated that these frames are not merely interpretive options but politically productive: they determine who acquires moral authority, which solutions appear conceivable, and which futures remain unthinkable. The victimization frame, despite its genuine humanitarian effects, carries a structural political cost in the erasure of Rohingya agency and the depoliticisation of a crisis whose resolution requires precisely the political recognition it withholds.

The concept of narrative infrastructure, introduced in this paper, offers a theoretical instrument for understanding why these patterns are so durable and so resistant to the good intentions of individual journalists, advocates, and scholars. Transforming the global narrative of the Rohingya crisis—and, by extension, of comparable crises in Syria, Sudan, Gaza, and elsewhere—requires attending not only to the content of individual articles but to the institutional, economic, and geopolitical conditions that determine which voices reach global circuits of narrative production.

Three practical implications follow. First, humanitarian organisations and advocacy networks need to invest in media produced by and for affected communities, supporting the development of narrative capacities that can compete, at least partially, with the infrastructural advantages of Western global media. Second, international journalism institutions need to develop training and editorial frameworks that explicitly address the political consequences of framing choices—not to substitute advocacy for journalism, but to cultivate the reflexivity that genuine accountability requires. Third, scholars working at the intersection of media studies, International Relations, and humanitarian law need to extend comparative analysis of narrative infrastructure across multiple cases, identifying the structural conditions under which alternative frames have succeeded in gaining traction within global humanitarian discourse.

The Rohingya remain, at the time of writing, among the most displaced and legally unprotected populations in the world. Their situation has not been produced by journalistic failure alone, and it cannot be resolved by journalistic transformation alone. But the narratives that circulate about them—who they are, what they have suffered, what they are owed—are not peripheral to the politics of their situation. They are constitutive of it. To take this seriously is not to inflate the significance of media analysis beyond reasonable bounds; it is to insist that the question of

who gets to tell whose story, and under what structural conditions, is a question with real political consequences for millions of people.

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