

From Battlefield to Human Suffering: Militarized Metaphor and Emotional Framing of Healthcare Workers in BBC News's COVID-19 Coverage

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Abstract

War metaphors became prominent in pandemic discourse, yet treating them only as institutional rhetoric can obscure how they intersect with personal testimony, vulnerability, and grief. This study examines how BBC News combined militarized language with emotive testimony and visual representation to frame healthcare workers during the global escalation of COVID-19. The dataset comprised 66 news clips published in BBC News's official "Coronavirus Pandemic" YouTube playlist, covering the period from its first available report on the outbreak to the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic. Each news story within the clips served as the unit of analysis. Framing analysis and discourse analysis were integrated with inductive thematic analysis, with attention to lexical choices, metaphor, pronoun use, evaluative language, quoted testimony, and accompanying visuals.

The findings identified three interconnected patterns. First, militarized expressions such as "war," "wartime," and "fight" were frequently articulated by healthcare professionals themselves rather than imposed solely through journalistic narration. Together with inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our," these expressions reconstructed hospitals as battlefields and medical personnel as collective combatants. Second, first-person testimonies humanized the crisis through accounts of exhaustion, staff infection, triage, grief, and ethical conflict. Third, narratives of sacrifice and martyrdom, reinforced by footage of exhausted or collapsed medical workers, positioned healthcare professionals as simultaneously heroic and vulnerable.

The study argues that militarization and humanization operated in tandem: war discourse elevated healthcare workers as defenders, while emotive testimony exposed their fragility and the human cost of crisis response. This study contributes to research on media framing, language and emotional appeal, and health journalism by showing how witness testimony and visual evidence intensified the affective force of pandemic reporting.

Index Terms

BBC News, COVID-19 Journalism, Emotional Framing, Healthcare Workers, War Metaphors