

# Audience Frames During 26/11 Mumbai Attacks: A Content Analysis of Letters to Editor

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**Abstract**— The 26/11 Mumbai incident was a major terror attack in India's recent history. It evoked lot of public reaction, mainly because of profuse media coverage and growing sense of vulnerability among the Indian citizens. The kind of reportage carried by newspapers was embedded with frames that infused the readers to think in line with the projected frames. The paper explores how 26/11 crisis was communicated by media sources to audiences affecting their perceptions. The paper further seeks to find out the frequency of such "directed" response in the form of letters to editors and establish the various frame categories that were dominant during the initial days of media coverage of this event.

**Index Terms**— Mumbai attacks, Terror, Media coverage, Frames, LTE (Letters-to-Editor)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Crisis reporting is always full of risks and loaded with responsibility. It is a slippery path. A reporter has to strive for fair reporting of facts, which usually get fuzzy in the wake of crisis. And this is where most of the reporters falter and fall into editorial designs of their respective media organizations. The fact is that media remains a political actor and institution in its own right, but its influence is ambiguous. Media production and reception is clearly a complex dynamic of factors at work: 'a process of constant negotiation between personal, professional, audience, organisation, and resources' (1). It remains a contested space, subject to various pressures, from the influence of corporate ownership and advertising censorship, through the input of staff and consumer, to the socio-political environment in which the production and reception goes on (2). In this battle for control, the division of power and resources is unequal, weighed towards ownership of the means production, although other groups can and do negotiate access to media space (3). Therefore, the creation of media products in India can also said to be subject to many influences due to its 'multiple loyalties, the plurality of its obligations and the diversity of its stakeholders' (4).

Given this scenario, the objectivity of media turns to be the inevitable casualty. More so, in a crisis which is unprecedented and sets off widespread disapproval and anger among the masses. Media shoots messages that create a particular pattern of thinking about the event, people or places.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the kind of audience responses entailed through newspaper letters-to-editor (LTE) during a crisis event of 26/11 Mumbai and discern the various frames in which such responses can be categorized for content analysis.

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### 1.1 Mumbai Attacks and Media

On 26 November, 2008, the terror attacks against two five-star hotels, a hospital, a popular cafe, a railway station and a Jewish center brought the financial capital of India- Mumbai - to its knees, leaving at least 171 dead and more than 230 injured. The 26/11 Mumbai incident shocked the whole country and was fully covered by media with young Indians sharply criticizing the politician's inability to avert terrorism, which has devastatingly affected tourism and the economy of India (5) (6).

Despite the advent of 24-hour news channel updating the 26/11 incident with exclusive visuals, previous survey on Indian media showed that the print media presented a general dimension of the incident (5). It was further noted that the newspapers had unnecessary exaggerations of the attack than it was actually perceived to be. Here, it was learnt that the unnecessary exaggeration of the terror attacks created panic and a sense of insecurity among the people (7). In a survey, the unnecessary exaggeration of the print media in India created inner fear in 78% of the public. This study noted government as one of the key bodies being blamed for their failure to detect and avert the attack, which in other studies (5) (6) were regarded as negative blames on the government. In view of this study, the print media also failed by presenting negative stories to the people rather than giving strengthening people's hopes with their security.

An editorial in Economic and Political Weekly opined, "Clearly it is time the media must train and sensitize itself for a more mature response. Power - and television is without doubt a powerful medium - needs to be exercised with commensurate responsibility. In this case, it is the responsibility to exercise restraint in playing to the gallery with an eye merely on the Target Rating Points and the competition in breaking news".

### 1.2 Letters-to-Editor

Letters-to-editor are a newspaper's way of getting feedback from its readers. While newspapers publish only a few of the letters they receive, editors are influenced by the volume of

mail they get on a given topic An article or editorial to which readers respond is more likely to be followed up with updated pieces of news.

A letter to the editor (abbreviated as LTE) is a letter sent to publication about issues of concern from its readers. Usually, letters are intended for publication. In many publications, letters to the editor may be sent either through conventional mail or through electronic mail. (8)

In newspapers, LTE are usually short comments that make one simple point. They are usually a response from readers to something that has appeared in the op-ed page, an editorial, or some information that has appeared in a news story. Moreover, they are usually about the news or newspapers editorial stand. At times, letter to editor becomes the place for the public to demand a correction; it conveys a complaint about inaccuracies or bias in news content.

As such, LTE "is a written way of talking to a newspaper, magazine, or other regularly printed publication. Letters to the editor are generally found in the first section of the newspaper, or towards the beginning of a magazine, or in the editorial page. They can take a position for or against an issue, or simply inform, or both. They can convince readers by using emotions, or facts, or emotions and facts combined. Letters to the editor are usually short and tight". (9)

There are several different ideas and approaches towards LTE writing. Some readers may comment on a charge or allegation in a news story. Others may take issue with regard to a policy or position in a story. While, still others may simply be a reader's observation on story.

Jenette Nagy writes that LTE are among the most widely read features in any newspaper or magazine. They allow you to reach a large audience. (10)

The letters that carry comments on the news stories of any other write-up of the newspaper are preferred for publication. There have been instances in newspaper history that a single letter led to an exclusive study for the newspaper. Therefore, timeliness and content of a letter-to-editor determines its value.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Agenda-Setting

Newspapers, news magazines and television news constitute important sources of information and attitude formation for the public (11) (12) (13). Bernard Cohen, referring to the agenda-setting effect of the media, posited that the press is very effective in telling us what to think about (14). Therefore, the news media are influential in setting the public agenda, and their coverage of the day's events aids the cognitive mindset of the public in terms of ranking the important news makers and issues (15) (16). This effect, referred to as first level agenda-setting, has remained as a theoretical anchor for hundreds of studies studying the effects of news media on the public's agenda or the ranking of salient news and news makers (17) (18). The transfer of salience,

though, is not only of the media agendas but of the attitude objects or news makers that define these agendas. For each of these attitude objects in the media agenda, there is a concomitant set of attributes that describe these objects affectively (19). This attribute agenda-setting, referred to as second level agenda-setting, also involves transfer of attribute salience from the media to the public (18) (20). However, while first level agenda-setting occurs on a cognitive plane, second level attribute agenda-setting of objects involves the affective dimension. Thus, second level agenda-setting suggests that the media not only influence the public in *what* to think about but also *how* to think about the attitude objects described in the news (19). In addition, some characteristics of the news objects may become more salient than other attributes. In other words, some attributes of the attitude objects may serve as compelling attributes for their importance (21). As McCombs 2004 (22) notes, some characteristics of the news objects:

*... are more likely than others to be noticed and remembered by the audience quite apart from their frequency of appearance or dominance in the message. In the interpretation of a message some attributes also will be considered more pertinent than others. Certain characteristics of an object may resonate with the public in such a way that they become especially compelling arguments for the salience of the issue, person or topic under consideration.*

Kim (23) extended the relationship between second level agenda-setting and public attitudes to the idea of attitude priming, i.e. they showed the priming effect of the news media on the public's affective evaluation of issues.

Other studies have also supported the second level agenda-setting effect. Shah (24) showed that voter decision-making was influenced by media frames and issue interpretations by the news media. Kioussis (11) studied the relationship between attribute agenda-setting and public opinion of presidential candidates and found a strong relationship with public's attitudes.

### 2.2 Media News Framing

From attribute agenda-setting, it was a small theoretical leap to the concept of news framing by the mass media. As McCombs (18) posits:

Both framing and attribute agenda-setting call attention to the perspectives of communicators and their audiences, how they picture topics in the news and, in particular, to the special status that certain attributes or frames have in the content of a message.

Scheufele (25) posits that, 'framing influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient, but by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information'. While media frames are usually defined and identified at the macroscopic level as occurring across all news media, the interpretive schemas of audiences (also identified as audience frames) are described at the microscopic level. Audience frames guide individuals in processing and making 'sense' of the information provided by the media (26). Research has supported the influence of media frames

(as the independent variable) on audience frames (as the dependent variable). Huang (27), using the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas episode as a case study, showed how media frames made their way successfully into the construction of audience frames.

### 3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The preceding review of the theoretical literature leads to the objectives of this research study, enabling the examination of audience frames during 26/11 Mumbai attacks. Specifically, the study investigated the manner in which the letters in both the *Times of India (TOI)* and *The Hindu (TH)* depicted the audience frames during the first week of coverage of the attacks. As such, the content analysis of LTE in this study focused to examine the following objectives:

- To identify the dominant audience frames in letter-to-editor columns in newspapers
- To study the pattern of letter-to-editor columns in newspapers
- To find frequency of letter-to-editor columns in newspapers

### 4 METHOD

#### 4.1 Time Frame

The LTE appearing in *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* during the first week were selected for analysis. It was carried out because of the massive amount of coverage generated in the aftermath of the attacks. The focus was on the seven days following the start of the attacks, barring the first day (November 27) which carried no letter since the attacks had occurred late night and were still on. Therefore, the period of November 28–December 4, 2008 was analyzed. This was used to reflect on the content categorization of the letters and the type of messages highlighted by the readers.

#### 4.2 Sample

The newspapers selected were the daily *TOI* and *TH* because both these papers compete at the national level, and are considered leading as they feature high readership and are powerful in setting the tone for coverage in the country. Both *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* are seen as extremely influential with the ruling elite (28), (29) – or as Singh 1992, cited in (30) puts it, among “the prime moulders of policy”. To a significant extent, this is a product of their readership in the corridors of power in Delhi, the political capital. According to the Indian Readership Survey 2013 (Round 2), *TOI*, with a circulation of 2.1 million, is the leading English newspaper in Delhi, a position it had coveted for years, followed by *TH* (79,000) at rank three.

In addition to representing elite readership, these newspapers are read throughout the country, and most importantly, constitute a comprehensive representation of different political and newspaper ideologies in India.

#### 4.3 Units of Analysis

The letters to editor related to 26/11 Mumbai attacks

were chosen as the unit of analysis.

#### 4.4 Frame categories

All letters related to 26/11 Mumbai attacks were analyzed and classified into following seven frames since frames guide the conceptual union of words and thoughts (31) (32), (33), upon which individuals rely to make sense of their surrounding environments:

Media Coverage	coded as	MC
Tackling Terror		TT
Sense of Insecurity		SOI
Anger over Politicians		AOP
Emulation		E
Reinforcement		R
Enemy Construct		EC

### 5 FINDINGS

*Times of India*—It was found that there were only 14 letters to editor in *TOI* during the reference period. The total word count was 1497. Surprisingly, there were no LTE on 28 November, the first day of reporting 26/11, and no LTE were published on 30 November as it being the Sunday edition. Of the seven identified frame categories, LTE related to only 3 frames were found in *TOI*. It included 5 LTE in Tackling Terror (TT) frame while 6 and 3 LTE in Anger over Politicians (AOP) and Enemy Construct (EC), frames respectively.

In TT frame, readers have expressed their desire for political reform in country in the wake of events unfolding after 26/11. Others have demanded for ‘better internal intelligence, special courts for time-bound trials and a federal commando force to be clubbed in an autonomous department under apolitical official like the chief justice of India or the army chief’. To deal with terror events like 26/11, some readers have strongly called for the ‘proper implementation of tough anti-terrorism laws and execution of the punishments handed out to captured terrorists’. A few readers suggested that political insulation must be provided to intelligence agencies’.

In AOP frame, readers were quite harsh in their response and called for screening of would-be politicians by Election Commission. Some readers blamed politicians for leaving the country in dire straits. Pointing towards the callousness of leaders, some readers suggested that ‘complacency is a virus that must be cured’. A few readers expressed discontent over the use of terms like ‘damage control’ to describe a situation like 26/11. Some readers were of the opinion that ‘the Mumbai terror attacks could take place only because of negligence of ministers and bureaucrats’. A few readers termed the resignations of some ministers as ‘a ploy of the ruling establishment aimed at pacifying people’s anger against the failures of the government’. Lambasting politicians while referring to newspapers full of BJP ads ‘capitalizing on the terrorist attack’ some readers stressed upon the need to rise above partisan politics and stop exploiting the

situation for petty party advantage, especially when election period was on.

In EC frame, readers demanded that 'it is now time, after 60 years, for Indians to finally decide whether Pakistan is a friend or foe'. Readers opined that 'the basic problem in our response is that we are confused, fighting and winning wars against Pakistan, yet hesitating to press home the advantage. It makes more sense, after defeating them, to put in place strong controls so that they never cause trouble again'. Readers asserted that 'there is no dearth of evidence that the attack on Mumbai had its origin in Pakistan'. Some readers castigated Pakistani politicians for 'making false promises when it comes to agreements with other nations to put an end to terrorism'. Readers also persuasively suggested that 'it is high time Pakistan stop sheltering terrorists and come forward to seek global support to eliminate terrorism'.

Pertinently, all the letters to editor in *TOI* were written by readers in response to various news stories/editorials/articles by *TOI* reporters/writers.

**The Hindu**— It was found that there were around 110 letters to editor in *TH* during the reference period. The total **word count** was **6986**. Except for the Sunday edition on 30 November, letters were carried in rest of the editions of the week. LTE related to all the *seven* identified frame categories were found in *TH*. It included 14 LTE in Media Coverage (MC) frame, 22 in Tackling Terror (TT) frame, 14 in Sense of Insecurity (SOI), 27 in Anger over Politicians (AOP), 9 in Emulation (E), 9 in Reinforcement (R), and 15 in Enemy Construct (EC) frame.

In Media Coverage, MC frame, readers were not satisfied with the over-all coverage of the event by the Indian media, especially electronic television channels. Many readers believed that the media, for their part, publish pictures simply to aggravate the situation and the live coverage of the attacks on television was "chaotic". Many readers opined that the event has thrown a 'humongous demand for leadership in not only the political sphere but also the media. In one of the letters, a reader wrote, "For more than two days, we were witness to one-upmanship with the television channels making claims such as 'our reporter was the first...', 'these are exclusive pictures...' and so on". Some readers ridiculed the style of reporting by blaming media for not getting even the name of the person caught alive right. Every newspaper had a different name. One said it was Kasab, another said he was Kasam and yet another said he was Kasav as it is also being transpired that he is Ajmal Amir Iman.

A few readers in their LTE talked about the "media trial" with TV anchorpersons handing down verdicts on what should be done in the face of 26/11 as if they are an authority on all subjects. It was also observed that the manner in which "some of the TV news channels constantly speculated about the commando action in Mumbai, and the live visuals portraying sensitive operations were certainly not in the best interests of national security". While some readers termed it as "irresponsible and

outrageous journalism", others called it as "negative journalism" and "chaotic reporting".

Some readers opined that 'mature, responsible and evidence-based reporting has been replaced by callous, emotional reporting' and that is why "unbridled media freedom is as bad as no freedom at all".

Only 2 letters from MC frame lauded the role of media during 26/11 attacks. The readers in their LTE wrote, "Media did a wonderful job of making known the people's anger at the ruling establishment". The letters stressed that in an age of knowledge information, "it would be improper to keep society from accessing information, more so in a tragedy of this magnitude". Referring to the "bollixing up of media performances by the Indian officialdom", the letter writers questioned as to "when will Indian politicians and diplomats realize that the battle of the minds and public relations are as important as the battles fought by our armed forces"?

In Tackling Terror, TT frame, readers have expressed the need for revamping the strategy for combating terror. Many readers have felt that 'national security' must take precedence over all other considerations. Some readers were categorical in suggesting that 'terrorism in India has entered a new phase and we must learn to deal with terrorists ruthlessly and mercilessly'.

Stressing on the need to strengthen the security mechanism, some LTE mentioned about 'giving security personnel world-class training, the latest equipment, the best bullet-proof vests, and training them to make the best use of information technology to combat terrorism'. Few readers opined that time has come to create a 'federal agency' to combat and terrorism and avert such 'intelligence failure' in future so that 'our policemen don't have to face the assault rifles of terrorists with the defunct.303 rifles'. A reader wrote "The Mumbai terror attack was a slap in our face. We cannot blame the government alone because in a big country like India, it is difficult to check every individual entering or leaving a city. Therefore, let us understand that we cannot stop terror attacks. What we can do is to be more aware of what is going on around us".

In Sense of Insecurity, SOI frame, the feeling of vulnerability is dominant. Many readers have blamed intelligence agencies for having no clue about deadly arms and ammunition finding their way into the business capital. One reader apprehended that 26/11 makes "appear that once we leave home, there is no guarantee that we will return safely". Another one wrote, "One cannot but feel vulnerable". Another reader, "I am afraid because now the war is raging inside my house and not on country's borders. I am ordinary citizen. I feel helpless". A certain reader in LTE wrote, "The Mumbai attacks have exposed India's vulnerability to terror. I, like a majority of fellow Indians have never felt so helpless all my life". Some readers responded by saying, "We have become a soft target for terrorists. They are proving that they are far ahead of us. The event sends a shudder down our spines". The LTE in SOI frame commented, "We will

continue to fail in the fight against terrorism if we do not ensure political non-interference in the functioning of police and other security agencies; the politician-criminal nexus is not broken; and the police do not stop patronizing criminal outfits”.

In Anger over Politicians, AOP frame, 27 LTE have been published during the first week of 26/11 coverage. This emerges as the dominant frame depicting the immense anger that generated among masses in the wake of the attacks. It carries scathing criticism of the political leadership and maladministration, as readers believe that ‘vote-bank politics and parochial prudery upstage the national interests’. Many readers have expressed that ‘India is certainly not safe in the hands of our present-day politicians’. Many readers asserted that ‘while the nation pays homage to those who lost their lives fighting terrorism, angry Indians should wake up from their slumber’.

Some LTE had vehemently opined that ‘Ministers cannot escape responsibility by quitting or offering to resign. This is meant to divert the common man’s attention. It is just an attempt by them to make a virtue of their abject failure. Rather than being extenuating, their act only deepens our distrust of the political class’.

Some LTE suggested that ‘the political class has once again failed to protect the nation. They should be barred from contesting elections again’. Some readers questioned as to ‘why did we witness such a large-scale abdication of political responsibility?’ If ‘heads are rolling now, it is ‘because the leadership has no other way of dealing with people’s anger’.

There were also 3 LTE that have furiously reacted to Kerala Chief Minister’s outburst following his visit to the house of slain Major who lost his life during the counter operations.

In Emulation, E frame, 9 LTE have been published. Readers have tried to compare 26/11 attacks with 9/11 Twin Tower bombing. They have suggested that Indian political class should take some cues from America for tackling terror. Some readers wrote, ‘After September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the U.S. woke up to the ground realities of terrorism and curbed it effectively’ and that’s why ‘there have been no terrorist attacks in the U.S. after 9/11’.

Some readers opined that ‘George Bush might have been a total failure in many aspects but he did not allow another 9/11 to happen in the U.S.’

In another emulation suggestion, a reader wrote that ‘it is time we started meting out punishment to terrorists like Indonesia did recently’. Yet other one wrote, ‘the only solution is to adopt Israel’s policy of dealing with terror’.

Responding to the ‘Emulation’ option in LTE, some readers warned that it is not feasible ‘to jump on the American bandwagon’, and join the ‘war on terror’ and ‘take lessons from Israel’ as we should not forget that ‘terrorism in Pakistan took the worst turn only after Pervez Musharraf followed the prescriptions of George Bush’.

In Reinforcement, R frame, 9 LTE have appeared. The

readers have tried to re-emphasize their belief in the unity and integrity of India. One LTE read, ‘We must show the anti-social elements that we can get as tough as the Himalayas and as vibrant as the Ganges’. The LTE mostly stressed that ‘this national tragedy has infused a feeling of oneness among Indians’ and that ‘terrorists can shake the foundation of our buildings by their cowardly acts but not India’s resolve to fight terror’.

In Enemy Construct, EC frame, 15 LTE have been published. Majority of them are seeing the Mumbai attacks as ‘Pakistan sponsored’. Some readers asked, ‘Is it possible to have normal ties with Pakistan hereafter?’

The enemy construct was in LTE that supported a stern action against Pakistan, ‘In spite of frequent attacks by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists, we have not acted tough with Pakistan. The Pakistan Army and the ISI are anti-Indian and it does not matter who is in power there. It is time India talked tough and followed it up with action on the ground’.

Harsh suggestions like this appeared in some LTE, ‘The government should consider attacking terrorist training camps deep inside Pakistan, as is being done by the U.S. forces, using long-range missiles. The army should be allowed to destroy the terrorist training camps which have mushroomed along the border’.

Some readers warned that ‘Pakistan will become a victim of terrorism emanating from its own soil if it does not act in time’. Others went further by writing, ‘This is the right time to give a fitting response to Pakistan. Diplomatic relations should be suspended and the borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh sealed at once. A thorough combing operation should be carried out in all the States, especially in areas which are suspected of harboring terrorists. All refugees, irrespective of the nation they belong to, should be deported. And India should start issuing a national identity card to every citizen, carrying his or her fingerprints along with other personal details’.

However, a few LTE gave a different viewpoint about the approach of handling the ‘enemy’. One LTE read, ‘A responsible state should take calibrated action rather than hasty decisions like declaring war. Instead of solving the issue of cross-border terrorism, military action will only worsen our economic and security situation. As the largest democracy, India should pressure Pakistan through diplomatic means and force the country to stop helping or abetting terrorists’.

Few LTE openly read, ‘Some vested interests have introduced the war sentiment to exploit the people’s anger’.

Criticizing media and others who whipped up a ‘war-hysteria’, one reader wrote, ‘There is one word that is being flashed repeatedly on our television screens with respect to the Mumbai attacks — Pakistan. As a young citizen, I am afraid of the direction my anger is taking. Afraid, because I see that as a people we seem to have developed a gut-level violent reaction to that word. There seems to be an intrinsic inability to distinguish between the people of a country, the governing body, the military

and the various extremist groups that exist in that region’.

Asking for more accountability from leaders, a LTE read, ‘Pointing fingers at an outsider should not ease the pressure on our political elite. Our self-righteous rage against Pakistan’s inability to control its violent groups is a bit misplaced. We turn a blind eye to the devastation and violence committed by Indian extremist groups against fellow citizens. If we don’t take a breath to cool off, our angry chest-thumping could destroy us. We want action. But let us not use the language of war’.

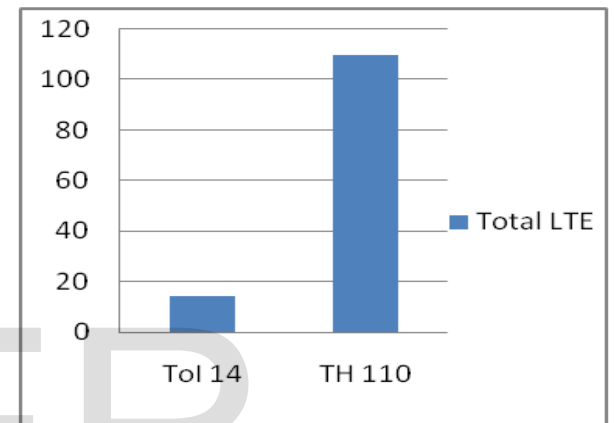
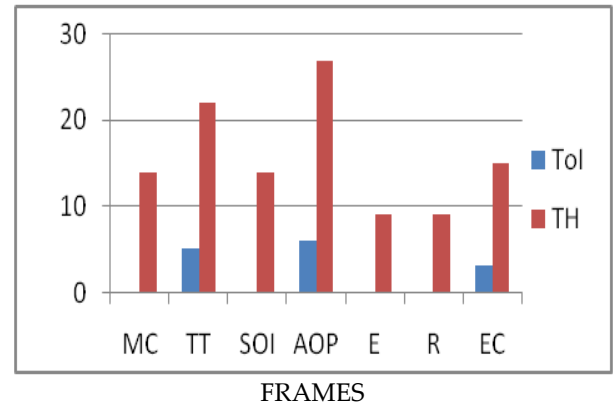
Some voices in LTE suggested that ‘it is unfair to bring pressure on the government to precipitate action against a neighboring country. India has a huge coastline and monitoring it is no mean task. It calls for extensive resources. The government is grappling with a difficult situation’.

Another reader wrote, ‘The main beneficiary in the event of an escalation of hostilities between India and Pakistan will be terrorists. Both countries face a grave problem of militancy and the latest attacks in Mumbai are a grim reminder of the endless possibilities of great consequences’.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The responses of readers in the form of letters to editor in both the newspapers reflect the frames that were dominant in the wake of 26/11 event and its reportage. In *Times of India*, few letters were published in comparison to daily *The Hindu*, which has given lot of space to letters. Pertinently, all letters in *Times of India* are responses to different editorials and opinion articles. Whilst, in *The Hindu* only 4 letters have been published in response to editorials carried by the newspaper. The remaining letters are the reflections influenced by the kind of reporting done by the newspaper.

In both *Times of India* and *The Hindu*, the letters are representative of second level agenda-setting which suggests that the media not only influence the public in *what* to think about but also *how* to think about the attitude objects described in the news (Melkote, 2009). The audience frames have guide individuals in processing and making ‘sense’ of the information provided by these two newspapers. The content of these letters is influenced by media frames (the independent variable) and as such has shaped the audience frames (the dependent variable). The various frames in the two newspapers have carried stories with AOP frame carrying the maximum letters in both TOI and TH though the number of total stories published in TOI and TH is 14 and 110 respectively:



Apart from sense of insecurity and anger over the politicians, the jingoism and war-hysteria displayed in these letters is the replicate of coverage of the 26/11 by the two newspapers. Though there has been an attempt by *The Hindu* to provide various shades of arguments through published letters, *Times of India* has published only those letters that give a lopsided viewpoint and tend to be agreeing with the related editorials and opinion pieces carried by it.

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