

A Comparative Analysis of COVID-19 Coverage in the United States Mainstream Media—Based on the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the news coverage of Covid-19 between 23rd Jan. to 29th Feb. in 2020 on The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. Based on theories of news framing theory, this study employs the method of news discourse analysis to examine the virus news. The results of discourse analysis show that these two newspapers emphasize the criticism on China's political system and related policy through a western perspective of liberalism and democracy, rather than the epidemic itself. The major themes include the criticism on China's medical system, the Chinese government's media censorship, and the description of China as a threat to the world which could be seen as the macro-proposition behind all the other themes. During the one-month research period, there are very few coverage on the Chinese government's policy against the epidemic such as the official subsidy on virus test and treatment, nation-wide medical support to Wuhan, community isolation policy, or the mobile cabin hospitals. Furthermore, we seldom see the reporting of the cooperation between China and the World Health Organization. The exclusion of these themes in the reporting narrowly and negatively presents the country of China and further strengthens the negative image of the Chinese government as a dictator and global threat.

Keywords: Covid-19, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, News framing theory

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, patients with pneumonia of unknown etiology were detected in Wuhan, China. At the beginning of 2020, the expert team of the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China identified the cause of the epidemic as a new type of coronavirus and renamed the 'pneumonia of unknown etiology' as 'novel coronavirus-infected pneumonia.' In mid-January of the same year, the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus was shared with the World Health Organization. Subsequently, with the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the virus confirmed, China imposed a lockdown in Wuhan on January 23, 2020, announcing the adoption of measures to close off and isolate epidemic affected areas, in an endeavor to stop the spread of locally acquired cases in China with Wuhan as the main battlefield. By February, multiple cities outside Hubei Province, China had also announced the implementation of lockdown management. Meanwhile, the novel coronavirus had gradually spread across the globe. For example, by the end of February, 1,766 confirmed cases had been reported in South Korea, and the number of new cases in Italy and Iran was also rising continuously.

The lockdown in Wuhan had instantly become the center of global attention and received extensive media coverage. In general, the public at large has limited understanding of and little interest in international affairs, and usually lacks personal experience with international news events. The less experience one has, the more heavily one rely on the information and interpretations provided by the media (Zucker, 1978). That is, people are inclined to accept what is reported by the media. Accordingly, media texts play a significant role in shaping public impressions of news stories, foreign countries, and their citizens. In global news coverage, 'Anglo-American hegemony in journalism' has long existed in the field of international journalism and communication (Williams, 2011), namely, 'hot' zones (i.e., countries that play a leading role in the global

political and economic landscape, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and European Union countries) and ‘immense, blank’ regions (i.e., peripheral countries that have very little influence on the landscape and trends of world development) together constitute the global news map (Hafez, 2011). More critically, the ‘model of Anglo-American hegemony in journalism’ indicates the adoption of a perspective with the United Kingdom, the United States, and other Western countries as the mainstream discourse system whereas voices of all the other regions are regarded as disparate concepts and therefore often identified as particular interpretations in the international news coverage (Shen & Dai, 2016). In other words, the United States-led Western countries have remained in the cardinal roles of manufacturing and selling in global news distribution networks today, constantly viewing the world from a Western perspective and further exerting an influence on a vast audience (MacBride, 1980; Fenby, 1986; Yang, 2016). As a result, this study, taking the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic as an example, analyzes the coverage of COVID-19 in the United States mainstream media from the start of the Wuhan lockdown to the end of February, in an attempt to understand what framework the United States mainstream media adopted in presenting this news event. Through this study, the role and position of global media in emergencies, particularly amidst the spread of diseases, are revealed. Further, the media practice under agenda setting and news framing theories are examined and the realistic path for the media embodiment of objectivity and impartiality principles is explored.

2. Literature Review

This study will analyze media texts through qualitative methods, using primarily news framing and agenda setting theories as research frameworks. The following is a summary of the two theories.

2.1 News Framing Theory

Many scholars contend that news is a construction of reality reproduced through semiotic systems (Fishman, 1980; Gitlin, 1980). Through factors, such as media stance, social significance, professional ideology of journalism, and personal beliefs, and practices such as layout arrangement, theme production, and logic setup of news texts, media encoders (including news agencies, practitioners, and sources) present ‘facts’ to the audience and, in turn, create a ‘symbolic reality.’ According to Fowler, news is reported from a specific angle in a particular social, political, economic, and cultural context, as a result of which, such symbolic reality may be biased and unlikely to be truly objective. The adopted angle or news bias may be ‘intentionally’ generated by media organizations or individual media workers, as in deliberately adopting a specific news angle, or may involve an unintentional and implicit bias, leading to ideological difference-induced discrepancies in the news coverage (Zang, 1998). Through the concept of framing, one may understand how an event is described as a news story and the ideology implied therein.

A frame can be perceived as a central organizing idea for attaching significance to relevant events and suggesting what is at issue to provide people with a holistic foundation for thinking (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). It was not until the 1990s that researchers in communication introduced the concept of framing into news analysis. For example, Tankard (1991) argued that news framing provides the audience with the context of a news agenda through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and other processes, thus presenting exclusivity and inclusivity. That is, while including certain messages or facts, the framing mechanism also excludes certain other messages or facts, which will influence the framing effect of a text on the audience.

2.2 Agenda Setting Theory

The agenda setting theory is one amongst effects theories, describing the process by which mass communication media places emphasis and focus on an agenda by controlling the content, length, and quantity of news reports to deepen the audience’s impression of the agenda or influence their views and perceptions thereon, thereby achieving the propaganda effect that a given communication outlet hopes to obtain for the agenda (Huang, 2008). Relevant studies have demonstrated that important or impressive social agendas perceived by the audience are often significantly correlated with news agendas highlighted by news media. In other words, for news media, agenda setting is a critical step in news production, involving the type of agenda to be communicated, how to edit and present news content, and so on. As such, analyzing agenda setting methods adopted by the media will facilitate an understanding of their agenda preferences and the potential impacts and perceptions news content gives to the audience.

Agenda setting has a particularly significant effect on international news. Due to the difficulty in acquiring external information in an extensive, real-time manner and lack of direct experience with international news, the general population needs to rely on news media coverage to learn about international affairs. News media dominates who has the right to be heard and who has the right to speak. Variances in who shall be interviewed and which parts of an interview are extracted may lead to different social reactions; meanwhile, how much

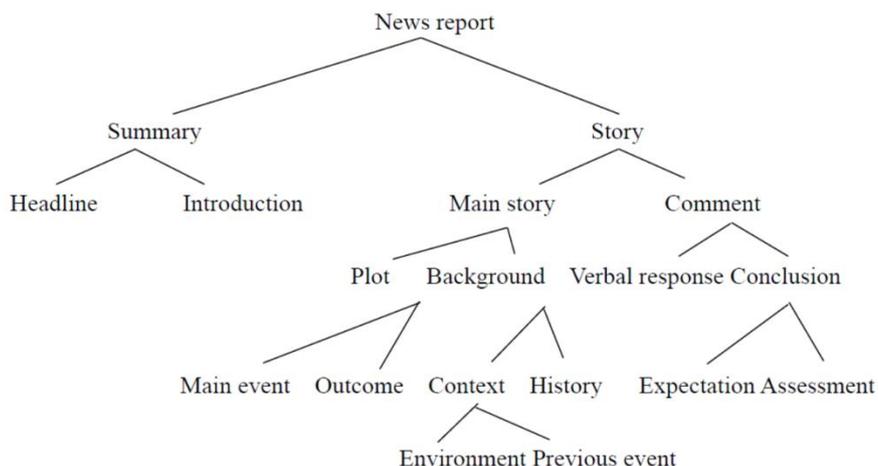
discourse power a speaker has also depends on the content presented by the media and the amount or length of coverage (Yang, 2016).

The content published by news media is not always a true reflection of real society. Affected by the context of the times and subjected to the layout constraint or time limit in the real world, news media can only present a few perspectives on some agendas in media content, with difficulty revealing the whole picture (Zang, 1999). In other words, media reality constructs individuals' subjective reality but may distort social reality. Accordingly, if the information presented by the media is biased or stereotyped, the audience may have negative impressions or interpretations of the people, events, and objects associated with a given agenda or event, and such an influence may be profound and far-reaching (Peng, 1984).

3. Research Methods

This study adopts van Dijk's news discourse analysis methods for research analysis. There is a multitude of approaches to news frame analysis. According to previous studies, news frames can be obtained by interpreting sentence propositions and the high-level meaning they form through news discourse analysis. Media reality presented by news media in a fixed form (frame representation) is readily visible under news discourse analysis. The samples analyzed in this study were selected from the period between January 23, 2020, the time when the Wuhan lockdown was imposed, and February 29, 2020. The analysis objects were two United States newspapers, the *New York Times* (NYT) and *Wall Street Journal* (WST), with ten news stories selected from each through the purposive sampling method. This study chose the period from January 23 to February 29, 2020, for sampling because it marked a critical period in China's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, a time in which most of China's policies and measures against COVID-19 were implemented and one that could best reflect the true state of media coverage.

In principle, news discourse covers two levels, textual and contextual levels. The former refers to language structures on different layers, whereas the latter pertains to the cultural factors, social experiences, and personal perceptions and attitudes of language users. The level of texts can be expounded along two dimensions, 'formal structure' and 'meaning structure.' Formal structure is also known as 'news schema.' According to van Dijk, most combinations of news coverage content have a specific pattern, as shown in the following figure (van Dijk, 1988: 55, cited from Huang, 2008):



In addition to an analysis on the level of formal structure, the themes or subjects of news discourse must be understood by considering the overall discourse as a unit, rather than purely analyzing words or sentences. According to van Dijk, the meaning structure of news discourse is divided into microstructures and macrostructures in a level-wise manner. Microstructures, composed of micro-propositions (which refer to the primary meaning of each simple sentence in a news report), represent the meaning of a given news report. Macrostructures, generated and summarized from microstructures, represent a higher-level meaning structure. Formed by several macro-propositions and further transformed into higher-level macro-propositions, a macrostructure ultimately becomes a clearly defined structure (van Dijk, 1985; cited from Yan, 2004: 95).

The purpose of discourse is to describe the regularity of language use, and discourse is not an independent linguistic object, but a combination of communication activities as a whole (van Dijk, 1983, 1988). As a result, the same language may generate different meanings when placed in different fields, situations, or communities. To analyze the frame structure of news texts, the present study will employ macro rules developed by van Dijk,

transforming micro-proposition-formed microstructures into macro-structures.

When macrostructures are constructed, the meanings hidden across discrete reports will become plainly invisible due to the combination of macro-propositions, which is an objective that discourse analysis seeks to achieve. Through macrostructure deconstruction analysis, the meanings implied in a theme that media articulates about can be understood. The implied meanings of each theme are subsequently combined to present the final result, that is, the 'media reality' of an event constructed by the media. This study will also draw on van Dijk's macro rules. By converting microstructures in COVID-19-related news texts into macrostructures, the study examines what news frames and macro-propositions were adopted by the *NYT* and *WSJ* concerning the COVID-19 pandemic during the research period, while further analyzing the frames and the themes.

4. Analysis of News Discourse in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*

4.1 Analysis of News Discourse in the New York Times

Ten news articles selected from the period between January 23rd and February 29th were analyzed using methods such as deletion, generalization, reconstruction, and retention. Based on the analysis, nine macro-propositions (i.e., ultimate propositions) were identified. Their detailed descriptions are provided as follows.

(1) Statistics on the number of infections/deaths in China

This macro-proposition was stated in over half of the ten news articles, which manifests its importance. News discourse covering this type of infectious disease or mass casualty incidents would typically express the severity of an epidemic or the gravity of an incident by emphasizing the continuously rising number of infection and death cases, and the *NYT* is no exception. During the sampling period from the end of January to the end of February, China sustained the most severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since its outbreak in Wuhan. The *NYT* simply presented figures in its coverage of this proposition without using unnecessary or sensational adjectives. Notwithstanding, the alarming and continuously rising numbers, combined with other reports on epidemic prevention policies (such as the Wuhan lockdown), still allowed the audience to perceive the gravity of the epidemic that was continuing to spread.

During this period, signs of large-scale infections had not been observed in other countries; accordingly, the *NYT* focused its epidemic coverage entirely on the situation in China, even viewing the epidemic as a domestic problem in China. Moreover, skepticism about the number of infections and deaths appeared in its reports from time to time, for example:

"...the latest figures confirmed warnings that the true scale of the epidemic remains muddled" (02/14).

(2) Criticism against China's health system

Since the Wuhan lockdown on January 23, the Chinese government had dispatched in stages and batches a large number of healthcare professionals to support the region. Two major hospitals, Huoshenshan and Leishenshan Hospitals, were constructed therein. Subsequently, a large number of mobile cabin hospitals were built to treat patients with mild symptoms. However, the *NYT* did not highlight these incidents in its coverage of this macro-proposition, but instead focused on criticizing China's healthcare system. This proposition was visible in its epidemic coverage between the end of January and the end of February, mainly describing China's deficiencies in medical resources, including a lack of professional training for healthcare professionals and shortages of epidemic prevention materials.

Its report presented this proposition by citing Wuhan citizens' descriptions of their panic about the epidemic and inability to receive proper treatment, which further enhanced the authenticity of news coverage and distrust of the public health system among the people in the epidemic area. In addition, the *NYT* also suggested that the problem of health and medical resource deficiencies had remained absent from reports delivered by Chinese state media, indicating that the state media had not revealed the truth to the public, and further questioning the credibility of the Chinese state media.

On the other hand, the *NYT* also presented positive news coverage on China's advancement in epidemic prevention. For example, a report released on February 22 described the steady increase in the number of people recovering from the infection, acceleration in the speed of testing, and new progress in the development of new treatments in China.

(3) Chinese government's control over news media and Internet content

This proposition appeared in large quantities in the *NYT* epidemic coverage. Two macro-propositions are derived: the central government of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control over the media, and the government's

exploit of state media for its own propaganda.

At the end of January, the *NYT* suggested that Chinese state media deliberately ‘downplayed’ the epidemic by giving it little coverage. The *NYT* quoted experts as saying that this approach was intended to avoid causing public panic, and, more importantly, to reduce public doubts and criticisms over the CCP central government. However, with the spread of the disease and the aggravation of the epidemic situation in Wuhan, Chinese media (both state-run media outlets and those with greater commercial influence) sustained pressure from the government. Media outlets were ‘informed’ and ‘requested’ to report more positive information on the epidemic and to comply with government instructions, for example:

"news media...have been told to focus on positive stories about virus relief effort" (02/06).

In its coverage of this proposition, the *NYT* cited most information from anonymous sources within the media, which manifested that these sources were under pressure and reluctant to disclose their identities when divulging relevant information. During the initial stage of the epidemic, the Chinese government did not impose full control over Internet content. Criticisms on the Internet at the time were largely targeted at local government officials. In February, however, critical remarks on the Internet were increasingly directed at higher-level leaders. As such, more restrictive Internet regulation policies were enforced during that time. The Chinese government typically controlled online information by deleting messages, banning users from posting comments, or even directly labeling some content as rumors. However, the *NYT* quoted a large number of comments from Chinese people (or netizens) who provided their identities in its coverage of the CCP's control over Internet content, to present a state in which their freedom of speech was subject to restrictions on the Internet.

In addition to media censorship, the Chinese government also exploited state media for propaganda campaigns. For example, moving stories or photos of those who made sacrifices for the epidemic were disseminated through media, with the objective of enhancing solidarity and patriotism among the people, for example:

"...with image and tales of unity and sacrifice aimed at uniting the people behind Beijing's rule" (02.27).

However, the mechanisms and effects of such propaganda were sharply questioned in the *NYT* coverage, dismissed as inappropriate and even potentially deceptive to the public.

(4) Incident of Dr. Li Wenliang

The *NYT* coverage portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a courageous whistleblower, whose death sparked off floods of rage among the Chinese people and marked the failure of the Beijing regime. Through interviews with Li and his mother, the *NYT* insinuated that many people in China were concealing the truth about the epidemic, whereas Li was politically oppressed and discredited for spreading rumors because of his honesty. The concealment of the epidemic in the early stage also led to the subsequent massive-scale spread of the virus. After Dr. Li's passing, the government formed an investigation team ‘under the pressure of public opinion’ and depicted Li as ‘a loyal soldier aligned with the government's cause’ (2020.02.08) through the media. The wide disparity in Li's image before and after his death revealed the CCP government's authoritarian rule and potential inclination to conceal the extent of the epidemic, while also demonstrating that the voices from the general public expressed online had exerted a certain degree of influence on the Beijing regime.

(5) China threat theory (anti-China discourse)

The *NYT* published the United States Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's speech on China (perceiving China's power as a threat to the world) on January 31. Although the speech was described with such adjectives as ‘stark’ and ‘blunt,’ and balanced reports on anti-discrimination discourses (in Japan and Canada, for example) were presented, distrust and dread of the Chinese government were also expressed in the *NYT* coverage, for example

"China wants to be the dominant economic and military power of the world, spreading its authoritarian vision for society and its corrupt practices worldwide." (01.31).

The *NYT* held a skeptical and negative view on China concerning its economic and military power, authoritarian institutions, and threats to regional security. In addition, its reports also displayed increased anti-China sentiments in countries around the globe due to the spread of the epidemic. Some of the anti-China behaviors or remarks were shown to be rumors in the news texts by quoting statements from authorities concerned, and some were supplemented with relevant balanced reports. In reality, however, a certain fear of Asians or racial stereotypes had been reignited in the hearts of Westerners because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(6) Public criticism of the government in China

This proposition was basically present in all types of reports from the *NYT*. For example, the *NYT* viewed the passing of Dr. Li Wenliang in early February as the tipping point of public discontent with the government. As a

result, a large number of voices criticizing and questioning the government emerged on the Internet, which was termed an ‘online revolt’ (2020.02.08). In addition, the *NYT* perceived the Internet medium as a significant tool for transformations in China’s current and future situation. Although the CCP’s central government remains in control of the Internet, voices demanding freedom of speech have been expressed online. The *NYT* also quoted profuse comments from netizens professing their dubiety and resentment against the government, for example:

“...many young people have been reading a lot of firsthand information on the internet...they were angry and confused by what they learned. There’s some gap between what the young people are really like and what the government believes what they’re like” (02.27).

Chinese netizens considered that they could obtain more truthful information in a faster manner from the Internet. To them, the information provided by the state media appeared absurd and showed low credibility. There was a huge gap between the government’s perceptions and what the people truly experienced. The general public seemed to feel tired and helpless toward the propaganda content released by the state media. In their opinion, what the people need in the real world is not a lavish glorification of those who have made sacrifices, but genuine reviews to prevent similar circumstances from occurring again.

(7) *Wall Street Journal’s* negative coverage of China

Mutual comments among American media outlets are not a common phenomenon. However, the *WSJ* published a commentary in early February criticizing China as the ‘real sick man of Asia,’ which subsequently triggered a series of effects between the Chinese and the United States governments. This situation, unusually, led the *NYT* to also comment on the event. This proposition can be divided into five aspects in the *NYT* coverage, as detailed below.

The first aspect pertains to China’s reactions to the *WSJ’s* commentary. The Chinese government exhibited sharp reactions and attitudes, equating such racist remarks with a type of malicious attack on China that hurt the feelings of the Chinese people. The Chinese government demanded that the *WSJ* should admit its mistake and issue a public apology for publishing the commentary. The Beijing regime even expelled three *WSJ* reporters out of China because of what the journal had done.

Second, after China voiced strong protest, the *WSJ* merely issued a statement expressing regret, while stating that China’s decision to expel journalists was a harsh and unprecedented one. However, because how the *WSJ* addressed the issue concerned its journalists’ actual work of reporting in China in the future, the *WSJ* staff took polarized views on this event. On one hand, dozens of its journalists and even the author of the commentary participated in a protest petition, requesting the editor-in-chief to change the news headline and apologize. On the other hand, the *WSJ* came forward to note that its news and commentary departments operated separately and independently, and that both enjoyed freedom of speech. Ultimately, the *WSJ* did not apologize for the headline of the commentary.

Third, the United States government also expressed views on this matter, stating that the commentary published by the *WSJ* fell within the scope of freedom of speech, and therefore the government had no right to intervene. In addition, before China expelled the three *WSJ* reporters, the United States unusually announced a new policy on Chinese media, stipulating that Chinese media outlets should be classified under government agencies in the United States, thus restricted from enjoying the freedom of the press. This policy showed that the war between China and the United States had expanded from trade to news media.

Fourth, the *NYT* specifically quoted a comment from the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China regarding this incident, which stated that China’s decision to expel American journalists was an unprecedented act of retaliation and an indication of Beijing’s constant attempts to control the freedom of media coverage by means of visa issuance.

Fifth, in its coverage of this incident, the *NYT* adopted a policy by which both positive and negative opinions were presented. On one hand, the newspaper cited views from scholars and the author of the commentary, dismissing the headline as discriminatory and inappropriate. On the other hand, it waved the flag of freedom of speech, expounding the fact that news and commentary departments operated independently of each other. Despite the presence of both positive and negative viewpoints in its coverage, the *NYT* commentary on the incident echoed the views of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, indicating the Chinese government’s strong likelihood of interfering with freedom of the press. For example, during news reporting in China, international media outlets frequently encountered difficulties that are deliberately created by the Chinese government. Accordingly, they have developed an inclination to conduct self-censorship, and would spontaneously avoid certain sensitive issues, such as news of corruption among high-level officials. In addition,

the *NYT* further suggested that the Chinese government exaggerated this incident through the state media to provoke wrath among the Chinese public, thereby diverting public attention away from the government's failure to handle the epidemic properly so as to cover up the fact, for example:

"...the 'Sick Man' headline was brought to wide attention there by state-controlled media, amid nationwide concern over an epidemic that has killed more than 2,400" (02.23).

(8) Economic impact of COVID-19

In its coverage of this proposition, the *NYT* mainly focused on the impact of the epidemic on the United States economy, rather than the economic loss sustained by China. For example, a report on February 22 indicated that Chinese tourists formed the second largest source of tourists to New York City, and thus their spending power would affect the economic benefits of the entire city. The *NYT* expressed a pessimistic outlook on the economic impact of COVID-19, arguing that the situation would be even worse than that of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003. In addition to citing economic figures, the news coverage also quoted views from multiple business owners and operators, and presented epidemic-induced economic losses based on the actual situation at the moment, for example:

"the manager of a hotel...estimated the loss from the coronavirus outbreak at 'well over \$100,000 and climbing" (02.05).

(9) Beijing replaced officials in epidemic-affected areas

The *NYT* disclosed in a report on February 14 that Beijing had dismissed local officials who performed poorly in addressing the epidemic, and referred to the replacement officials as 'Xi Jinping's protégé' (2020.02.14). The report suggested two reasons for the replacement: first, to appease public rage and give the public an explanation; second, to prevent public rage from escalating to engulf higher-level officials of the central government. The *NYT* evidently considered this measure to be an act of self-protection for Chinese high-level leadership.

This political action was also used to present the CCP's single-party dictatorship: local officials are appointed by the central government and are fully obedient to its command in an increasingly centralized authoritarian system that Mr. Xi has built (2020.02.14). In addition, the *NYT* also described the epidemic as a major threat to the CCP's rule, noting that the core of its leadership was being seriously challenged. Not only was the leadership questioned, but public trust in the government had also declined.

The *NYT* even used the term 'Wuhan pneumonia' in a report on January 24, but had renamed the disease 'coronavirus' in reports since February following the WHO's announcement of the name. Judging from these nine propositions, the United States had a low number of confirmed cases during this period with no signs of cluster or community infections observed. Accordingly, the *NYT* coverage of the epidemic mainly focused on the situation in China, without providing much information on the development of locally acquired cases in the United States. By contrast, the newspaper was more concerned about the impact of the epidemic on the United States' economy. In its coverage of the epidemic in China, a significant proportion of the content was devoted to criticizing the Chinese government. Whether in terms of the system, the actual implementation of epidemic prevention, or remarks quoted from the Chinese public, the *NYT* coverage placed the Chinese government in the frame of an authoritarian government. In addition to directly using the word 'authoritarian' in its reports, the newspaper also projected an authoritarian image of the CCP in such propositions as the CCP's control of news media, its decision to expel journalists, and the appointment of local officials by the central government. From the initial concealment of the outbreak to the subsequent spread of the epidemic, the Chinese government showed an image of unreliability. In general, the *NYT* presented balanced reports on several propositions. For example, despite the mention of medical resources deficiencies in China's epidemic prevention measures, the *NYT* also introduced China's progress in the research and development of COVID-19 treatments, and the enhancement of healthcare professionalism after SARS. On the proposition of anti-Chinese sentiments or discrimination, the *NYT* also presented discourses on the freedom of speech versus anti-discrimination, allowing different viewpoints to be expressed in news reports. However, the analysis also found that the *NYT* still voiced strong criticism against the CCP regime frequently based on the contention of liberal democracy, arguing that the CCP government failed to fulfill its responsibility of maintaining the safety of the people, who were manifestly deprived of freedom of speech. On the other hand, the emerging online media was bringing the Chinese people a new realm and opportunity, providing them with a more reliable channel to speak up and see the truth. The *NYT* held optimistic views and expectations for online media, believing in its potential to form a force for bottom-up changes.

4.2 Analysis of News Discourse in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ)

Ten news articles selected from the period between January 23rd and February 29th were analyzed, and nine macro-propositions (i.e., ultimate propositions) were identified. Many of the identified propositions share similarities with those of the *NYT*. Their detailed descriptions are provided as follows.

(1) Statistics on the number of infections/deaths in China

Identical to the case of the *NYT*, this macro-proposition was stated in half of the ten news articles selected from the *WSJ*, which manifests its importance. Similarly, the *WSJ* also sought to communicate to its readers the severity of the epidemic through the rising number of infections and deaths.

Because the epidemic primarily affected China during this period, the *WSJ*'s coverage also focused on the changes in COVID-19-related figures in China. However, the figures reported were often accompanied with doubts in the *WSJ*. For example, in a report published on January 26, the *WSJ* quoted an anonymous source as stating that the number of infected people released by the Chinese government might be thousands less than the actual number, insinuating the possibility of China hiding the truth about the epidemic, for example:

"Analysts suspect the actual number of infected is thousands higher than the currently confirmed 1,400" (01.26).

(2) Criticism against the China government

The *WSJ* devoted a huge proportion of its coverage to this macro-proposition, which can be broadly divided into two aspects: criticism of China's epidemic prevention measures and policies, and that of China's political system.

In terms of epidemic prevention measures, the *WSJ* reported on the Wuhan lockdown, the public wearing masks for epidemic prevention, the attitudes of local and central governments, and so on, while using a negative and skeptical tone. For example, the *WSJ* quoted the statements of foreign experts and scholars multiple times, criticizing the lockdown decision with such adjectives as abrupt, shocked, drastic, and unexpected, and suggesting that the policy not only ignored the likelihood of ensuing economic losses, but also aroused unnecessary indignation and dread among the people. The *WSJ* further used this policy to justify the imposition of travel bans on China by other countries, despite the WHO's recommendation that such bans were unnecessary. Moreover, the policy by which the Chinese government called on the public to wear masks to prevent the spread of the virus was also described as unnecessary and absurd in the coverage of the *WSJ*.

The *WSJ*'s coverage connected mask-wearing and lockdown policies with Chinese government institutions, referring to them as the examples to illustrate the CCP's control over the speech and conduct of the people, to indicate that the Chinese people were oppressed under the implementation of CCP institutions and forced to accept these ineffective and unnecessary policies. The *WSJ* also identified local governments' concealment of the epidemic situation and the central government's inefficient response measures as two main reasons for the spread of the epidemic, for example:

"...global agreement that China was cheating" (01.29).

However, the coverage neither explicitly disclosed the source nor presented conclusive evidence of concealment, and the so-called 'global agreement' appeared to be ungrounded. The *WSJ* also directly associated its accusation of the Chinese government's hiding the epidemic situation with the proposition that the Chinese government was untrustworthy: due to its failure to provide open and transparent information, the Chinese government was not accountable. At the end of February, the *WSJ*'s coverage also showed, through the statements of the Chinese people or European governments, that the CCP regime was unable to win the trust of its people or other countries around the world, because the epidemic had gradually spread outside China to threaten Europe.

In addition to epidemic prevention policies, the *WSJ* also criticized China's political system, suggesting that such an authoritarian system as communism was closed and unhealthy. The coverage took Xinjiang internment camps, the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, and the victory of the pro-independence camp in the 2020 Taiwan election as examples of declaration of resistance and stance against the authoritarian rule of the CCP. In addition, the *WSJ* also connected China's inefficient response to the epidemic, a public health issue in nature, to political issues, arguing that the epidemic had created a grave political crisis within the CCP. Not only had the leadership of the central government been called into question, but the government had also lost public trust and support. These points show that the *WSJ*'s criticisms against the Chinese government were all intended to portray the Chinese government as 'untrustworthy' and vulnerable and easily breakable in the face of crises. Notably, in its several mentions of the leader of the CCP in the reports, the *WSJ* sometimes used 'Xi Jinping' directly

without any title provided. In addition, the *WSJ* also deliberately linked Xi to Mao Zedong, suggesting that Xi employed wording and speech similar to Mao's during the epidemic prevention period (both using the description of 'people's war') with an intention of imitating the strongman image of Mao. Nevertheless, given Mao's image in the Western media, this connection was arguably a negative one deliberately established.

(3) Chinese government's control over news media and Internet content

This proposition also appeared in the *WSJ*'s coverage multiple times. A report on January 26 directly associated the spread of the epidemic with China's news censorship system, for example:

"...if this develops into a catastrophe...the Communist regime's efforts to control information will deserve much of the blame" (01.26).

The *WSJ* identified media and speech control as a feature of the CCP's authoritarian rule, arguing that the CCP has been exploiting the media to control people's thoughts since 1949 and has tightened control over information since Xi took office. This macro-proposition was manifested in the following three aspects:

The first aspect concerns the concealment of the epidemic situation. The *WSJ* expressed doubts over the epidemic-related data presented by the Chinese media, suggesting that the media suppressed epidemic-related news in cooperation with the government, which led to the subsequent spread of the epidemic. This phenomenon indicated that the Chinese media, under the complete control of the government, merely played the role of a mouthpiece while showing no concern for the well-being of the people. Second, the Chinese government exploited the media as a tool for political propaganda. Through media outlets, public opinion was manipulated to create favorable conditions for the central government. Third, the *WSJ* indicated that, after the Li Wenliang incident, the CCP central government tightened control over online speeches, and pressured the state media to dissimilate as much government information as possible, in an attempt to downplay harsh online criticisms of the government provoked by the Li Wenliang incident. China's control over media and speech was presented in the *WSJ*'s coverage from a rather negative perspective, not only directly connected to the spread of the epidemic, but moreover placed in the frame of deprivation of people's freedom and basic rights to life.

(4) China threat theory (anti-China discourse)

This proposition, clearly and straightforwardly presented in the *WSJ*'s coverage, can be analyzed from two dimensions: first, perceiving China as a threat and expressing criticisms directly; second, reinforcing this proposition through anti-China discourses expressed by other countries. In respect of the first dimension, for example, a report on January 29 associated China's political system with the virus by using the term 'a communist coronavirus' directly in the headline. The report described communism as a man-made political virus that would endanger all humanity worldwide, posing a menace to the world politically, militarily, and even technologically. Politically, the *WSJ* highlighted that the CCP's authoritarianism differed completely from the system of Western democracies, the wide disparities in the values between the two sides, and that China's attempt to export its form of government threatened Western democracy. Militarily, China's military ambitions in the South China Sea were aimed at controlling the region while diminishing the power of the United States therein. Technology-wise, the *WSJ* mentioned Huawei's 5G technology, indicating that the adoption of Huawei's technology would present a threat to global information security. In a nutshell, China was portrayed as a potential enemy and adversary of the West by the *WSJ*, and its system, one different from the Western system, was deemed detrimental to the world - such detriment might even be intentionally, rather than unintentionally, caused.

On the other hand, the *WSJ* reported that Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, the United States, and other countries imposed travel bans on Chinese tourists due to the epidemic. For example, Indonesia prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the country. In addition, the *WSJ* also revealed that Chinese people were discriminated against or verbally abused because of the epidemic, as in the incident where some Chinese were publicly called 'Chinese virus' on the subway in the United Kingdom. The *WSJ*'s coverage even implied through an interview with a Singaporean expert that China today was not only politically untrustworthy, but also doubtful in the field of health and hygiene - because the virus arose from Chinese people's savage, uncivilized behavior of eating wild animals. These reports on anti-Chinese sentiments or hostility toward Chinese people reinforced the negative image of China and the Chinese people, and intensified the sense of mistrust.

(5) Economic impact of COVID-19

The *WSJ* devoted profound attention to the effects and impacts of the epidemic on the economy, which had a direct relationship to its long-standing emphasis on economic issues. Its focus on economic issues also directly gave rise to the proposition that global enterprises and industry chains were highly dependent on China and that

such a dependency relationship would lead to astronomical losses due to the impact of the epidemic. The *WSJ* allocated a large proportion of its coverage to descriptions of how issues such as labor shortages and quarantine-induced absence from work affected the production chain of businesses in China. Through these descriptions, the *WSJ* suggested that most companies today relied excessively on China, which was a perilous situation, and, therefore, changes should be taken into effect to such a situation after the epidemic. Major international companies would choose to move production lines elsewhere, in lieu of relying solely on China, for the purpose of risk diversification.

(6) Incident of Dr. Li Wenliang

The *WSJ* cited interviews with Dr. Li detailing how he discovered the novel coronavirus, alerted others, got accused of spreading rumors and received punishment as a result, became infected, and questioned the government. By portraying Dr. Li as a people's hero and whistleblower fighting for freedom of speech, the *WSJ*'s coverage criticized the Chinese government for its infringement on human rights and concealment of the epidemic situation. The Li Wenliang incident also brought out another related proposition, that is, the Chinese people's dissatisfaction and indignation towards the government. Because of Dr. Li's passing, Chinese citizens (particularly those in online social media communities) explored with rage, accusing the government of punishing someone brave enough to tell the truth, and failing to grasp epidemic-related information in a preemptive manner and respond promptly, which led to the subsequent escalation of the epidemic. In other words, the *WSJ* presented how the Chinese public felt exasperated and discontented with the government while also appearing powerless at the same time.

(7) Incident of *Wall Street Journal*'s commentary

The *WSJ* published a commentary on February 3 entitled 'China is the real sick man of Asia.' The article instantly aroused genuine public outrage in China upon its release. Regarding its content, the commentary first cast suspicion over Beijing's concealment of epidemic-related information, and expressed a distrustful attitude toward how China's central government addressed subsequent economic issues. The author argued that the epidemic would devastate China's economy and the global supply chain, and further raised a series of questions: If China were to suffer slower economic growth and political instability, what impacts would such developments have on the global influence and balance of power? Would it be possible to reshape the world order? The author did not actually provide definitive answers to these questions, but simply proposed some questions and hypotheses regarding the possible situation after the epidemic. Therefore, a closer look would reveal some disparities between the text and the news headline, that is, rather than accurately reflecting the text, the headline included very extreme, straightforward, negative, and misleading words. The person who created the headline either intentionally or unintentionally misunderstood or misinterpreted the author's original intention.

The *WSJ* coverage of this incident involved the following four dimensions. The first dimension concerned reactions from China. In retaliation for the publication of the commentary, Beijing later expelled three *WSJ* reporters from China. The Chinese government condemned the article for racial discrimination and maliciously defaming and denigrating China. The Chinese public was also outraged by the commentary. Notwithstanding, the *WSJ* indicated that China continued to overplay this incident through the state media and the Internet to deliberately intensify the Chinese public's aversion towards the *WSJ*. The second dimension pertained to the fact that the *WSJ* merely expressed regret but did not apologize for the content of the commentary. The *WSJ* provided an explanation for this, noting that its news and commentary departments were two separate units that operated independently of each other, with no affiliation or interference with each other. Since its journalists were not involved in the publication of this commentary, China's decision to expel the *WSJ* reporters was unwise and unnecessary. In addition, the *WSJ* cited a previous case in which an admonition was received for reporting malfeasance of Chinese influential officials, to reinforce China's image of corruption and jeopardizing freedom of the press. Third, the *WSJ* also noted the response of the United States government to the incident. It quoted the statement from the United States Secretary of State, denouncing China's decision to expel journalists and arguing that the commentary of the *WSJ* fell within the scope of freedom of speech, while insinuating that Chinese people were unable to enjoy the freedom of speech and liberally express their opinions as the United States population do. Fourth, the *WSJ* quoted statements from The Committee to Protect Journalists, criticizing China's attempts to control the communication of information and news during the epidemic, and to control international media outlets by means of visa issuance and other measures. In general, the *WSJ* did not present much response to the commentary per se, but instead took a critical attitude towards the effects it had generated, launching a counterattack against Beijing's suppression of press freedom and media.

(8) China-United States relations

The Chinese–United States relations were portrayed as both competitive and mutually hostile by the *WSJ*. This proposition can be discussed along four dimensions. First, from the perspective of international politics and geopolitics, China's global military and political influence had threatened the United States, and the *WSJ* suggested that China's expansion was to undermine the power of the United States. Second, on the topic of economy and trade, the *WSJ* basically took a stand in favor of the Trump administration, describing the use of traditional diplomatic strategies against China as inefficient and impractical. In addition, repeated mentions of the Huawei incident in the coverage also underscored the distrust of the Chinese government. Third, in respect of the United States epidemic prevention policies, the *WSJ* deemed the imposition of travel bans on China to be reasonable, while also noting that the United States was not the only country that imposed such bans on China, but the Chinese government hurled criticism solely at the United States. This phenomenon showed that the United States and China were in an unmistakably unfriendly bilateral relationship and that China was being deliberately provocative. Moreover, the *WSJ* also stated that multiple private enterprises and charities in the United States provided medical assistance to China, but the Chinese government disregarded the beneficent intention of the United States. On this point, the United States was depicted as a giver and helper, whereas China was portrayed as a victim short of resources and in need of succor. Fourth, China and the United States both displayed hostile attitudes toward media-related policy enforcement. First, the United States classified the Chinese media as government agencies and further restricted their freedom of interviews and reporting. Subsequently, China expelled *WSJ* journalists following the commentary published by the journal. The *WSJ* had little discussion on the policies adopted by the United States, but expressed extensive criticism against China's expulsion of its journalists while also citing multiple sources to attack the Chinese government's restrictions on freedom of speech and press.

(9) China–Europe relations

In terms of China–Europe relations, the *WSJ* mainly focused on economic and trade relations. First, data were cited to present close economic and trade interactions between China and countries in Europe and the degree of Europe's dependence on China. In addition, statements of multiple officials from European countries and opinion polls were quoted to create an untrustworthy image of China. First off, the *WSJ* described the practice of Chinese officials in Europe as a 'bullying approach,' indicating Chinese officials' frequent use of threats or bribes to coerce others into submission, for example:

"...China's ambassador to Berlin has issued implicit threats of targeting the German car industry if Huawei is excluded" (02.28).

Second, China was portrayed as a country with a completely disparate government system and values. As such, China cannot be regarded as a mere world factory or a huge market, but should be perceived as a potential threat or challenger with differences at the more fundamental core. Finally, the *WSJ* cited the results of opinion polls to show that favorability and trust in China had also increasingly declined among the European public. The *WSJ* coverage not only suggested that European countries should re-examine their economic and trade cooperation with China, but demonstrated that the China–Europe relations were in reality far more fragile than what the economic and trade data indicated.

The discriminatory term 'Wuhan coronavirus' was used to refer to the epidemic in the *WSJ* coverage at the end of January and even after the WHO renamed the disease COVID-19. This word choice indicated that Wuhan was the birthplace of the virus, which inevitably ended up spreading to the United States. In other words, the United States was an innocent victim of this epidemic, whereas China was the perpetrator. In addition to its ineffective control of the epidemic, the Chinese government was also depicted as an authoritarian regime against democracy and liberty in the coverage. The reports on China's concealment of the epidemic, control of information and media, and suppression of Hong Kong or Taiwan all presented that China had strikingly different values and political systems from those of Western countries. In sum, the *WSJ* coverage of China during the period of research showed negativity and bias, lacked balanced, comprehensive reports, and excessively defended the policies and positions adopted by the United States.

4.3 Comparison of *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* Coverage

A comparative analysis of the *NYT* and *WSJ* coverage reveals several similarities and differences. First, China was given a negative image by both newspapers in their epidemic coverage. China was described as the birthplace of the epidemic with backward conditions and insufficient medical resources, an authoritarian country that withheld information and in turn caused the spread of the epidemic, and a potential threat to the world politically, militarily, and technologically. While in comparison with that of the *WSJ*, the *NYT*'s epidemic coverage offered more detailed and balanced accounts, with more neutral wording and descriptions. Second,

both newspapers noted the economic impacts of the epidemic; however, the *NYT* focused more on the impacts on the local situations in the United States (e.g., sightseeing and tourism industries), whereas the *WSJ* devoted greater attention to those on global production and supply chains as well as on major enterprises (e.g., impacts on Apple Inc.). Although economic dependence on China was indicated by both newspapers, the *WSJ* further criticized China's unreliability in production and markets, suggesting that adjustments should be made after the epidemic. A comparison of the two shows that the *WSJ* placed greater emphasis on the analysis of economic impacts due to its news bias, whereas the *NYT* had more detailed discussions on the internal affairs and government institutions of the CCP. Third, both newspapers criticized China's political systems and media policies from the perspective of liberal democracy. In particular, China's control of international media practitioners was a major point of criticism. However, compared with the *WSJ*, the *NYT* had more extensive coverage on how the Chinese government manipulated media and what Chinese netizens criticized the government for. Of the two, the *NYT* quoted information from more diverse sources. Fourth, the *NYT* provided more complete and holistic coverage on the incident of the *WSJ* commentary. Despite the same perspective (i.e., critiquing China), the *NYT* presented a more balanced analysis. Its coverage included *WSJ* journalists' protest against the commentary and quoted the author's dubiety over the headline. Fifth, both newspapers questioned the authenticity of China's official data on the epidemic, suggesting the possibility of the Chinese government concealing the truth. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* cited profuse content from Chinese netizens and state media as evidence of the low credibility of official statistics. By contrast, the *WSJ* did not provide relevant evidence or accounts to support its doubts and criticisms, which therefore appeared less convincing.

However, from a general perspective of the United States mainstream media, these two newspapers shared similarities in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of addressing the epidemic as the main theme, the newspapers devoted a substantial proportion of coverage content to criticisms against the Chinese government, including China's hygiene conditions, healthcare systems, central government's authoritarianism, suppression of media and freedom of speech, and discourse on the China threat theory. The *NYT* and *WSJ* criticized China's political institutions and policies from a perspective of liberal democracy, the political system of their own country. In spite of its attempt to present balanced reports while covering the incident of the *WSJ* commentary, the *NYT* still exhibited a sharp tone in criticizing Beijing's control over freedom of expression in media outlets. The China threat theory, in particular, could be perceived as the main axis of ultimate propositions in the news texts of the two newspapers. The sense of distrust of China and the perception of threat toward China's rise drove the two newspapers to get more deeply entangled in negative sentiments toward China (the country *per se*) in their coverage of the epidemic. In this regard, the outbreak and expansion of the epidemic had also become an emphatic point to be utilized for demonizing China.

5. Conclusion

Since their birth, media outlets have been stressing that objectivity and impartiality are their lifelines. However, in a massive number of media practices, media outlets have been found to have the ability to influence the degree of public attention to facts through agenda setting. The *NYT* and *WSJ* not only affected the audience's ranking of important agendas in agenda selection, but also had an influence on the angles and directions of agenda presentation. In a sense, the *NYT*, which claimed to be a quality newspaper, showed respect for facts. For example, despite the use of the term 'Wuhan pneumonia' in a report on January 24, the *NYT* had renamed the disease 'coronavirus' in its coverage since February following the WHO's announcement of the name. By contrast, the *WSJ* used the discriminatory term 'Wuhan coronavirus' to refer to the epidemic in its coverage at the end of January and even after the WHO renamed the disease COVID-19. Moreover, the *WSJ* suggested that Wuhan was the birthplace of the virus, which inevitably ended up spreading to the United States. In other words, the United States was an innocent victim of this epidemic, whereas China was the perpetrator. In terms of news stance, the two newspapers shared commonalities in that their coverage, instead of focusing on the epidemic, repeatedly questioned the CCP regime. The *NYT* had extensive discussions on criticisms of the Chinese government. Whether in terms of the system, the actual implementation of epidemic prevention, or remarks quoted from the Chinese public, the *NYT* coverage placed the Chinese government in the frame of an authoritarian government. In addition to directly using the word 'authoritarian' in its reports, the *NYT* also projected an authoritarian image of the CCP in such propositions as the CCP's control of news media, its decision to expel journalists, and the appointment of local officials by the central government. From the initial concealment of the outbreak to the subsequent spread of the epidemic, the Chinese government showed an image of unreliability. Admittedly, the *NYT* presented balanced reports on several propositions. For example, despite the mention of medical resources deficiencies in China's epidemic prevention measures, the *NYT* also introduced China's progress in the research and development of COVID-19 treatments, and the enhancement of healthcare

professionalism after SARS. On the proposition of anti-Chinese sentiments or discrimination, the *NYT* also presented discourses on freedom of speech versus anti-discrimination, allowing different viewpoints to be expressed in news reports. However, the analysis also found that the *NYT* still frequently voiced strong criticism against the CCP regime using the arguments and standpoints of democracy, contending that the CCP government failed to fulfill its responsibility of preserving the safety of the people, who were manifestly deprived of freedom of speech. On the other hand, the emerging online media was bringing the Chinese people a new realm and opportunity, providing them with a more reliable channel to speak up and see the truth. The *NYT* held optimistic views and expectations for online media, believing in its potential to form a force for bottom-up changes. Criticism against China was even more plainly visible in the *WSJ* coverage. The Chinese government was depicted as an authoritarian regime against democracy and liberty in its coverage. The reports on China's concealment of the epidemic, control of information and media, and suppression of Hong Kong or Taiwan all presented that China had strikingly different values and political systems from those of Western countries. Moreover, the *WSJ* coverage of China during the period of research showed negativity and bias, lacked balanced, comprehensive reports, and excessively defended the policies and positions adopted by the United States.

In their coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic, the *NYT* and *WSJ* both adopted the values and standpoints of democracy and presented a biased, negative image of China by drawing on the media reality constructed through selective texts. They managed to portray China as an authoritarian, irresponsible, backward great power depriving its people of freedom of speech and the press. Based on the aforementioned discussion, news is a construction of reality, a media reality that is ultimately presented by media encoders through selection, emphasis, deletion and other methods in the process of news production, and there is a strong likelihood that such reality cannot be genuinely objective.

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