

Discursive Othering in the Fighting Against COVID-19: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the China-Related Coverage of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study takes the coverage of China related COVID-19 news as the data to examine how a global epidemic is being reported. Through a corpus assisted analysis of the keywords and collocations, together with a qualitative examination of the discursive strategies, we find that an epidemic paralyzed China who adopts ineffective epidemic prevention measures is constructed. Using headline as a mini narrative, and headlines as a moral lecture are the commonly adopted discursive strategies. The findings have some implications for the fair-minded communication across countries in the era of the global fight of the pandemic.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis, China, COVID-19*

I. INTRODUCTION

A new crown pneumonia (COVID-19) broke out in China at the start of the new year in 2020 and then spreaded to the whole world after March. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, great attention has been paid to how the epidemic was dealt with in China. Newspapers like *The New York Times*, *Guardian*, *Times* and etc. have released reports on the development of the epidemic in China. In the era of globalization, where the ties between countries are growing closer and closer, people's perception of the outside world is gained and influenced by the media. Media's coverage of international affairs directly influences people's emotional attitude towards a country.

Current research on China-related news coverage focuses on China's national image in terms of what kind of image is constructed by examining political, economic and cultural events. COVID-19 epidemic is a public health emergency that does not involve political factors. Understanding media's coverage of the new coronary epidemic will give us a better understanding of how a public health emergency is represented by news media, and how media ideology, as a mediator of the social events and media discourse, plays its role in the representation of a public health emergency.

This study, therefore, aims to conduct a critical discourse analysis of the China-related coverage of

the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, with the hope to explore media ideology in the coverage of a global public health emergency.

II. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was first proposed by Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979) in *Language and Control*. CDA is mainly concerned with the role of discourse in institutionalization, the reproduction of power, the abuse of power (domination), and therefore is particularly interested in the detailed study of interfaces between local and global social structure, between discourse structure and social structure.

The representative figure who made a major contribution to critical discourse analysis is Fairclough (1989), who proposed a three-dimensional theoretical model for discourse analysis in terms of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. For Fairclough, critical discourse analysis must accordingly include three parts: (1) A linguistic description of the discourse. It can generally be analyzed from the perspective of lexical choice, grammar, and the structure of the discourse; (2) Explaining the relationship between discourse and the discourse process in terms of language behavior, coherence and intertextuality; (3) Explaining the relationship between discourse processes and social processes. van Dijk (1993) points out that the link between discourse and society is not direct, but requires a cognitive

interface, namely, mental models. Therefore, a socio-cognitive perspective of CDA can reveal more of implicit meaning and the interface between discourse and society. In summary, critical discourse analysis pays more attention to implicit meaning and the unbalanced distribution of power. A critical analysis of discourse can uncover the abuse of power and thus contribute to the equality in society.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Data collection

The New York Times, one of the papers with considerable influence in the United States, and *The Guardian* and *The Times*, papers with considerable influence in the United Kingdom were selected as the sources of the data. The time period of this study is four months from January 8, 2020 to April 30, 2020, which is the time the COVID-19 was discovered and controlled in China.

News reports were retrieved from the Lexis Nexis Academic (<https://www.lexisnexis.com/>) academic database by setting the sources as "*The New York Times*", "*The Times*" and "*The Guardian*", the keywords as "Coronavirus", "China", the language as "English", and the time duration from 8

January 2020 to 30 April 2020. All together a corpus of 2210 news reports were collected.

Considering that the large number of news reports are far beyond the researchers' ability to deal with, a further sampling was conducted. The sampling principle is that each day, three reports from each newspaper are randomly selected, and if the total coverage of a paper in a day is less than three, all the news reports are selected. Finally, a total of 345 reports are sampled.

B. Analytic procedure

We will first examine the overall coverage of COVID-19 in terms of the tendency of coverage and reporting attitude. Then a corpus assisted quantitative analysis will be performed to analyze the keywords and collocation of the word "China" to explore discursive features of the corpus. Finally, a qualitative analysis is conducted to examine the discursive strategies of the media when China related COVID-19 issues are reported.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. An overview of the coverage

"Fig. 1" shows the overall tendency of the coverage from 8 January to 30 April.

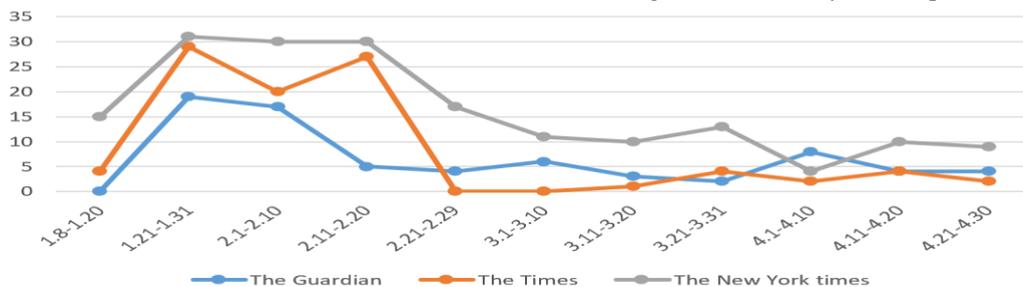


Fig. 1. Overall tendency of the coverage.

Since January 20, when Chinese expert Zhong Nanshan publicly affirmed the existence of human-to-human transmission of the new coronavirus, the number of reports increased sharply, reaching a peak, followed by a sharp increase in *The New York Times* and a relatively stable number of reports in *The Times* and *The Guardian*. Even when China has controlled the outbreak after February, the overall tendency of reporting has not changed significantly.

"Table I" shows the reporting attitude in the corpus. The overall coverage is dominated by negative attitudes, with 30-50 percent neutral coverage, and with relatively little positive coverage. A typical feature is that all the three newspapers mentioned 2003 SARS-related events

in China from the very first article and claimed that the seriousness of the epidemic was initially masked.

TABLE I. REPORTING ATTITUDE

Tendency	The New York Times	%	The Guardian	%	The Times	%
<i>Positive</i>	2	1.11%	3	4.11%	0	0
<i>Neutral</i>	60	33.33%	27	36.99%	43	46.24%
<i>Negative</i>	118	65.56%	43	58.90%	50	53.76%
<i>Total</i>	180	100%	73	100%	93	100%

B. A corpus assisted analysis of the keywords and collocations

A keyword analysis could reveal the discursive features of the coverage that distinguish it from

other reports. "Table II" shows the top 30 keywords of the corpus, which can be put into 3 categories.

TABLE II. KEYWORDS IN THE CORPORA

NO	Keywords	Keyness	NO	Keywords	Keyness	NO	Keywords	Keyness
1	China	10491.8	11	people	1561.49	21	masks	978.32
2	coronavirus	6278.98	12	said	1445.48	22	medical	966.38
3	Chinese	4687.03	13	Hong Kong Kong	1439.45	23	quarantine	936.23
4	Wuhan	4601.06	14	epidemic	1410.07	24	government	913.59
5	virus	4388.19	15	Trump	1391.08	25	Xi	891.22
6	outbreak	3953.58	16	spread	1322.28	26	Hubei	886.27
7	health	2470.78	17	Sars	1201.52	27	authorities	884.05
8	officials	2436.29	18	infected	1166.92	28	patients	856.33
9	cases	1902.65	19	disease	1129.71	29	travel	838.6
10	Beijing	1655.8	20	global	1031.93	30	passengers	734.16

The first category is related to the epidemic in terms of the location and description of the epidemic. Keywords like "China", "Wuhan" and "Hubei" indicate the epicenter; "coronavirus", "patients", "Sars", "spread", "infected", "virus", "disease", and "outbreak" give a description of the epidemic and its spread. The second category is related to epidemic prevention measures. Keywords like "Chinese", "officials", "Beijing", "Xi", "government" and "authorities" indicate the key

figures in the prevention of the epidemic; "masks", "quarantine", "medical" shows the measures being taken. The third category is related to other external actors that of news value to the media, with Trump and Hong Kong being two typical words. To fully uncover how China is discursive constructed in the coverage, we have retrieved the top 30 collocations of the world "China", which can be seen in "Table III".

TABLE III. COLLOCATIONS FOR THE WORD "CHINA"

NO	Collocate	Stat	NO	Collocate	Stat	NO	Collocate	Stat
1	vocalized	7.93621	11	condemn	7.36505	21	unstoppable	6.93621
2	reciprocated	7.93621	12	smear	7.35125	22	unknowingly	6.93621
3	outnumber	7.93621	13	expels	7.35125	23	unheard	6.93621
4	interrogate	7.93621	14	wrested	7.35125	24	unescapable	6.93621
5	insidious	7.93621	15	wreaks	7.35125	25	undo	6.93621
6	hobble	7.93621	16	wise	7.35125	26	undisrupted	6.93621
7	ousting	7.93621	17	wheels	7.29878	27	underplaying	6.93621
8	improvising	7.93621	18	wealthier	7.19924	28	undergraduates	6.93621
9	opposes	7.52117	19	unwillingness	7.12885	29	undercutting	6.93621
10	confuse	7.52117	20	unsurpassed	6.93621	30	unavailable	6.93621

Collocations of the word "China" is characterized by words of negative semantic features. On the one hand, collocates like "outnumber", "unstoppable", "hobble", "unescapable", "undo" and "insidious" indicate the uncontrollable spread of the epidemic in China, by which an epidemic paralyzed China is constructed; on the other hand, collocates like "interrogate", "expels", "wrested", "unheard", "smear", "improvising", and "wreak" put the blame on China and show the media's suspicion of China's epidemic prevention measures, which has been proved effective later in the battle against the epidemic.

C. Analysis of discursive strategies

1) *Headline as a negative mini narrative:* Headline presents the topic of an event in a concise manner from a certain perspective. An examination of the corpus shows that in the coverage of China's performance in COVID-19, news headlines were used as a negative mini narrative to inform the readers not only of what had happened, but also the medias' negative evaluation of the occurrence as well. Four categories of news headlines were identified.

The first category presents a negative evaluation of the government. In a report entitled "Virus Spreads as World Pays for Dictator Xi," a dictatorial government and leader were constructed in the headline narrative by using just one sentence. Other examples of headlines in this category are "Offers to Send Expertise to China Remain Ignored", "Chinese Officials Race to Contain Anger Over Virus", "China Expels 3 Wall Street Journal Reporters as Media Relations Sour" and etc. The second category shows the negative influence of the epidemic. Headlines like "Coronavirus Spurs China to Suspend Tours Abroad and Xi to Warn of a 'Grave Situation'" and "Coronavirus Empties European Cities of Chinese Tourists" emphasized the negative influence of the epidemic to China. The third category shows the media's blame of China for the negative global influence. Headlines like "China's Coronavirus Has Revived Global Economic Fears" linked the COVID-19 with China closely by the noun construction "China's" and attributed all the negative global influence of the epidemic to China. The last category presents a negative evaluation of the China's epidemic prevention measures. Headlines like "Many in China Wear Them, but Do Masks Block Coronavirus?" shows the media's doubts on the epidemic prevention measure of wearing mask in China.

2) *Headline as a moral lecture:* Besides being used as negative mini narratives, headlines were also moral lectures in which what should do and should not do were lectured. An examination of the

corpus shows three categories. The first category is a blame of the data sharing. Headlines like "China must share all it knows about this mystery virus" and "The government needs to communicate with the public clearly, honestly and often about the coronavirus" show a moral blame by presupposing that China has not sharing data. The second category is an order for China to pay for the epidemic. Headlines like "Beijing must be called to account after this crisis for its lies about the spread of coronavirus, West can no longer turn a blind eye to China" use the modal verb "must be" to put China on the responsible part of the epidemic's negative influence. The third category is a blame on China's diplomatic policy of expelling American journalists. Headlines like "Trump Administration Considers Punishing Chinese News Organizations" depicted China as morally wrong party by using the word "punish", which presuppose a blame on the party who has made a mistake.

V. CONCLUSION

This study takes the coverage of China related COVID-19 news as the data to examine how a global epidemic is being reported. Through a corpus assisted analysis of the keywords and collocations, together with a qualitative examination of the discursive strategies, we found that an epidemic paralyzed China who adopts ineffective epidemic prevention measures is constructed. Using headline as a mini narrative, and a moral lecture are the commonly adopted discursive strategies.

van Dijk (1993) argues that the discourse of American news, when reporting on "non-white", "non-capitalist", "non-Western" cultural, racial or social groups, tends to manifest itself in polarized, antagonistic discourse patterns of "positive us and negative them" (Wodak, 2001). Western media's coverage of China is implicitly biased. As Zhang (2020) points out, "Western media coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic far exceeds that of Ebola, reflecting the fear and panic of the Western media and their discrimination against China and Chinese communities.

China's epidemic prevention results have disproved the suspicion of China's epidemic prevention measures. However, all the epidemic prevention measures were misinterpreted in the media discourse. The globalization and global fight of the pandemic calls for a fair-minded communication across countries. Apart from media criticism like the current study, in the practice, social networking such as Twitter Facebook, Tik Tok, and Weibo could be important platforms for people to tell stories of their own and fight against discourse abuse, so that power abuse and biased

communication can be hold and fair-minded communication can be promoted.

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