

Exploring the role of media framing in constructing a country's image during public health emergency: A comparative analysis of the news coverage about China fighting against COVID-19 in *the New York Times* and *China Daily*

Xiaolei Ruan

Zisheng Liu

School of Foreign Studies
Anhui University
China

Abstract

Media framing could function as constructing social reality and a country's image, which is embedded in certain social and cultural contexts. This study sets out to explore the role of media framing in constructing China's image during COVID-19 based on a comparative analysis of news coverage in the New York Times and China Daily. Based on the review of topics and the metaphors in the news articles, it is found that: 1) NYT and CD demonstrated different topic preferences and tendencies when reporting COVID-19 with NYT exhibiting a certain degree of politicization and polarization while CD emphasizing the medical efforts in fighting against the pandemic and corporation; 2) Both NYT and CD employed war metaphors to indicate the challenges brought about by COVID yet CD applied more diversified metaphors in the news coverage. The topics and metaphors analyzed in the corpus work together to frame and construct China's image in the time of COVID-19. This paper offers novel perspectives to explore the role of media framing in a country's image construction during public health emergency.

Key words: media framing; country image; topic; metaphor

Introduction

Media is an important source of information, whose role in public health emergencies is of great significance. Framing, which literally means the act, process, or manner of constructing anything, could function as constructing social reality (Scheufele, 1999). The role of discourses related to public health emergencies has been explored in the realm of communication studies, linguistics, psychology, and sociology, etc.

The outbreak of COVID-19 constitutes an unprecedented public health crisis and has been declared a global pandemic by WHO in 2020, affecting countries and people with 767,972,961 confirmed cases, 6,950,655 confirmed deaths, and 13,474,185,140 vaccine doses administrated¹. News stories and images provide people with sources to construct their understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021). Since the country's first case identified in Wuhan, China has made unremitting efforts in fighting against and controlling the spread of the COVID-19. There are much scholarly works focusing on media's news coverage about COVID-19, however, little attention has been paid to the relation between China's country's image construction and news coverage (both domestics and overseas) about China fighting against COVID-19.

This study intends to explore the role of media framing in constructing a country's image during public health emergency through a comparative analysis of the news coverage about China fighting against COVID-19 in the New York Times and China Daily.

Literature review

Media framing

Originated from Goffman (1974)'s frame analysis, a frame activates different kinds of schemas and then evokes or triggers a response from people (Wood et al., 2018). One of the major functions of a frame is to select and emphasize some aspects of reality and ignore and discard others (Diehl et al., 2015). According to Entman (1993), to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Media is a major source of information, and the content of media reporting can affect audiences' opinions in that how people understand issues typically depends on how such content is presented (Vreese et al., 2010). Therefore, media framing, which is defined as "the mediating mechanism through which the media's depictions of social groups activates schemas than influence individual opportunity and willingness to express sentiments toward that social group" (Lyu & Takikawa, 2022) constitutes our research interests.

Figurative framing, as a significant constitute of framing devices, means using figurative devices (metaphor, hyperbole, irony, etc.) as a way of media framing. Among these devices, metaphor has been considered powerful and important in that it aims to understand target domain (usually abstract or unfamiliar) in terms of source domain (usually concrete or familiar) by cross-domain mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Gui (2020) analyzed nine weeks' news reports of *Xinwen Lianbo*, one of China's mainstream media and discovered that the metaphorical war frame dominated the news selected. However, little is known about metaphorical framing in newspapers of two different counties, when issues of nationalism, stereotypes, and ideological differences could catch the researchers' attention.

A country's image construction

Country image, namely, the way people perceive other countries and nations, is an essential construct in international communication, which serves as multiple goals, such as economic, social, and political (Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017). As Galtung and Ruge (1965) put, news media were highly influential international image-formers in the way that they provide us with relevant information about what is going on in the world. However, news media are shown to nourish stereotypes. Mass media can only depict a very brief view of the world and tend to frame news by use of stereotypes, which, through priming effects, might activate or consolidate prejudices about social entities such as nations (Arendt, 2013). According to mirroring theory, people evaluate stereotypes of other countries depending on their own nation's identity, culture, and stereotypes (Hřebíčková & Graf, 2018), therefore, it is necessary to approach a country's image not only by self-construction but also by other countries' construction.

News coverage concerning COVID-19

With the deepening process of globalization, certain events such as terrorism, war, and illnesses have gained international exposure and provided ample sources of information for people to construct their understanding, sentiment, and even stereotype of these events. The outbreak of COVID-19 constitutes an unprecedented public health crisis and has been declared a global pandemic by WHO on 11th of March, 2020. The pandemic, with devastating effect has not only caused death tolls and economic loss but also influenced individual behaviors and opinions in several ways.

The COVID-19 provides a particular arena for crisis reporting and for constructing national identities in the press. Since its first case was reported in Wuhan, China has been going to great lengths in combating the pandemic. There are a great number of studies focusing on the role of news coverage in COVID-19, for instance, Gong and Firdaus (2022) conducted a mix-methods study to analyze how China has depicted COVID-19 while facing international stigma, conspiracy, and blame; Yuan, Liu, and Wang (2022) reviewed topics of COVID-19 news articles in CNN and China Daily respectively; Lyu and Takikawa (2022) explored media framing and expression of anti-China sentiment in COVID-19-related news discourse. These studies have deepened our understanding of media framing in the news coverage in the time of COVID-19, with some investigating the topics of news articles while others analyzing the micro linguistic features, for example, rhetorical devices in the news articles. However, very limited study has focused on news report about China fighting against COVID-19 within a relatively long time span, especially those built upon a comparative analysis of media framing by both a domestic and a foreign press. This study intends to fill this void by exploring the role of media framing in constructing China's image through a comparative analysis of the New York Times and China Daily. Based on the research purpose, two research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are the topics of news articles about China's fighting against COVID-19 in the New York Times and China Daily?
2. What kinds of metaphors are applied in the above-mentioned news as ways of framing to construct China's image?

Methods

As shown in the research question, this study explored not only the macro features of the news articles selected, for instance, the topic of the news, but also the micro devices used as media framing, thus, a qualitative research design empowered by CAQDA (Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis) fits the explorative nature of the current study.

We collected COVID-19 news related to China published on the New York Times (henceforth NYT) and China Daily (henceforth CD) respectively. As two international press, NYT and CD have posted timely and topical news about COVID-19. The New York Times is a daily newspaper published in New York City and distributed internationally, which is the largest metropolitan newspaper in the United States. CD is the English version of the de facto official state newspaper, The People's Daily, which was chosen because it portrays itself as reporting information to the world on the political, economic, cultural, and social aspects of China.

In total, 193 news articles were collected using the Lexis Nexis database. The articles were extracted from NYT and CD respectively. The time span was from Dec. 31st, 2019 to Dec. 31st, 2022. This data collection period is relevant and significant because it covers the beginning, peak, and lessening period of the pandemic. The searched keywords were: "China" AND "Novel coronavirus" OR "Novel coronavirus 2019" OR "2019 Novel coronavirus" OR "2019 nCoV" OR "COVID-19". Articles with less than 100 words or more than 2,000 words were removed from the data base, because the former length normally falls in the category of government reports or notices while the latter length usually falls in invited commentaries or column articles, neither of which could fit in with the current research purpose (Hoffman and Slater, 2007; Kininmonth et al., 2017; Gong & Firdaus, 2022). These 193 news articles were then used for both manual coding on printed paper and computer coding assisted by Nvivo (12plus). After two rounds of analyses were finished, the results were compared, and inconsistencies were further discussed until consensus was reached. Two coders with high-level English proficiency examined and annotated each news article by topics and metaphors independently. When a consensus cannot be reached, we asked an additional coder to decide on the label (category). To ensure the reliability of the coding scheme, two coders randomly selected 50 news articles to code before the real coding, when the weighted value of kappa of the intercoder reliability test is 0.81, which is over the accepted standard 0.75.

After reading all of the collected news articles, a coding scheme was built. Codes in this study were generated both deductively (relying on existing conceptual attributes) and inductively (identifying new themes from discursive materials). Guided by the principle of unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and saturation, we coded the news articles and obtained 15 nodes for the first research question and 108 nodes for the second research question.

Findings

We identified both the topics and metaphorical framing in the collected news articles so as to explore media framing in constructing China's image during COVID-19.

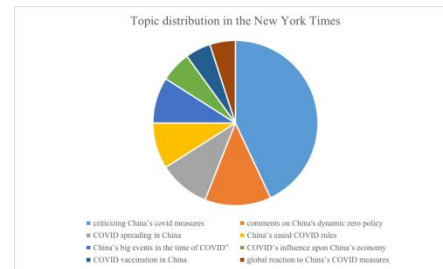
Topics and top-words

RQ1 examined emerging topics and top words in new articles about China fighting against COVID-19 both in the New York Times and China Daily.

In the New York Times (Table 1), eight broad categories of topics were revealed by our data analysis, with "criticizing China's COVID countermeasures" (43) the most frequently appeared topic, followed by "comments on China's dynamic zero policy" (13), "COVID spreading in China"(10), "China's eased COVID rules"(9), "China's big events in the time of COVID"(9), "COVID's influence upon China's economy" (6), "COVID vaccination in China" (5) and "global reaction to China's COVID measures" (5) based on our data analysis.

Table 1 Topic distribution in NYT

TOPICS	COUNTS
criticizing China's covid measures	43
comments on China's dynamic zero policy	13
COVID spreading in China	10
China's eased COVID rules	9
China's big events in the time of COVID"	9
COVID's influence upon China's economy	6
COVID vaccination in China	5
global reaction to China's COVID measures	5



Firstly, China's COVID measures were criticized by NYT in their news articles, for instance, the government's COVID measures have been described as "inflexible and exhausting", "outdated", "harsh", and "fueling anger and anxiety among Chinese"; misinformation about "the severity of COVID", "side effects" spread. It is worth noting that NYT applied narratives when it comes to the protests caused by its COVID measures, which intends to add trustworthiness of the news articles.

Secondly, NYT didn't hesitate to judge China's dynamic zero policy, which were described as "the effort to control the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan"; "a drag on China's economy, travel and everyday life", and "the country's COVID goal".

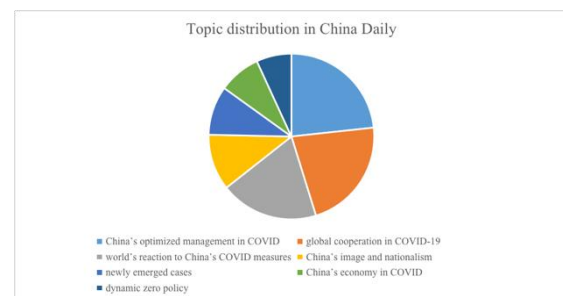
Additionally, China's eased covid measures was another frequently appeared topic, which was described as the result of "unusually widespread protests" in the country, one which "basically signals the final end of zero COVID", and "a rollback of the country's strict coronavirus restrictions".

Lastly, other topics such as "China's big events", "China's economy", "COVID vaccination", as well as "global reaction" were also found in the news articles, for instance, the Beijing winter Olympics and the CPC's 20th congress were mentioned as big events during the COVID-19; China's economy was described as "rowing at its slowest pace in decades under the government's policy of preventing infections with strict lockdowns"; China and other countries were "working toward approval of each other's pandemic vaccines"; many countries required "COVID tests for travelers coming from China" amid concerns about a coronavirus surge after an eased rule had been issued.

In China Daily (Table 2), seven broad categories of topics were identified with vaccination and drugs (20) the most dominant theme, followed by "China's optimized management in COVID" (17), "global cooperation in COVID-19" (16), "world's reaction to China's COVID measures (14), "China's image and nationalism" (8), "newly emerged cases" (7), "China's economy in COVID" (6) and its "dynamic zero policy" (5).

Table 2 Topic distribution in CD

TOPICS	COUNTS
vaccination and drugs	20
China's optimized management in COVID	17
global cooperation in COVID-19	16
world's reaction to China's COVID measures	14
China's image and nationalism	8
newly emerged cases	7
China's economy in COVID	6
dynamic zero policy	5



First, vaccination and drugs to prevent and treat COVID was found to be the most dominant theme in CD’s news articles. For instance, it claims that China’s COVID testing capacity reaches 900 million a day, which leads the world; China widens choices for COVID-19 booster shots; Drug researchers in China are making progress on developing therapies to treat COVID-19 with several antibody drugs; China will provide a total of 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the world in the year of 2021.

Second, CD attaches considerable significance to China’s optimized management in COVID. For instance, Chinese health authorities announced that they had decided to rename “novel coronavirus pneumonia” to “novel coronavirus infection” and downgrade the management of the disease from category A to category B starting Jan 8 (2023); China has recently optimized its COVID-19 control measures to minimize their impact on people’s normal life and economic activities with closed-off management lifted, mass testing reduced, precise contact tracing, home isolation considered, and less interruptions for medical services.

Furthermore, global cooperation and world’s reaction to China’s COVID measures are also important concerns in CD. For instance, China has strengthened cooperation with Central Asian countries in various areas despite the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020; African nations and China working together to combat the coronavirus could usher in a new era for China-Africa cooperation; Through joint efforts in combating COVID-19, Italy and China will further enhance their mutual support and foster win-win cooperation in all fields in this important year (2020).

Lastly, in many news articles of CD, China’s nationalism and the positive images of fighting against the pandemic have been demonstrated, for instance, China’s epidemic response sets global example with its concerted efforts, the government’s robust response, virtual education, etc., and world welcomes China’s optimized COVID-19 policies. Besides, China’s economy in the time of COVID, some newly added cases of covid, and its dynamic zero policy were identified as important themes.

The most common and relevant key words related to COVID-19 in China in both NYT and CD were “China”, “COVID”, “Chinese”, “people”, “health”, “control”, etc. (Figure 1), which suggest similar trends of focus in COVID-19 news coverage.



Word cloud of top words in NYT



Word cloud of top words in CD

Figure 1 Top words in NYT and CD

Metaphorical framing

RQ2 elucidates metaphors employed in the corpus so as to frame and construct China’s images in fighting against COVID-19.

To further understand media framing in both NYT and CD, metaphorical analysis was conducted, and war metaphors have been found to dominate when framing China fighting against COVID. Generally speaking, NYT applied fewer metaphorical devices (41) than CD did (67). Apart from war metaphors, other metaphors were also identified in the corpus.

As for NYT, 27 (65.9%) war metaphors were found with the words “war” and “battle” permeating through the corpus. Of them, similar phrases like “all out people’s war”, “all out war”, and “people’s war” appeared 10 times, which are quoted from the Chinese news coverage; NYT also compared China’s fighting against COVID as a “tragic battle” (4), which indicates NYT’s negative attitudes towards China. Neutral expressions such as “COVID war”, “pandemic war”, “protracted war”, and “renewed war” were found. Words such as “trauma”, “shadow”, “tsunami”, and “whammy” were found to indicate the emerging cases and the influence upon its economy in a situation of zero COVID. NYT also compared the strategy of playing down the threat of the virus to a “gamble” and the practice of traveling in the time of COVID to playing “Russian roulette”, which is full of uncertainties in itself. Animal metaphors were also identified, for instance, NYT compared the first groups to get vaccinated as the “lab rats”, and the Chinese government’s decision to open up after zero COVID to a “donkey” who has finished the grindstone and can be slaughtered.

As for CD, the war metaphor has also been dominant (44.8%) with its variations as “war”, “battle”, “fight”, and “blitz”. These words were modified by diverse words and expressions such as “critical”, “vital”, “resolute”, “global”, as well as “all out people’s”, emphasizing the scale and importance of the COVID war. War related expressions, such as “battlefield”, “battleground”, “frontline”, “bastion of defense”, and “line of defense” were also found in the corpus. Besides, CD also compared China as a “power-making giant”, and a “time-tested friend” for Pakistan. The virus has been compared to “common enemy”, “demon”, and the COVID situation to “test of fire”, “a sudden onslaught”, “calamity”, “dark moment”, and an earthquake (“epicenter”). A series of COVID measures and its later optimized measures were compared to “green light” and “sharp blade”.

Both the topics and metaphor frames work together to construct China’s image in fighting against COVID with different orientations in NYT and CD, which could be the results of cultural, ideological, cultural, as well as social differences.

Discussion

Based on a comparative analysis of news coverage about China fighting against COVID-19 in NYT and CD, it is found that NYT and CD demonstrate different topic preferences and metaphorical tendencies when reporting China’ fighting against COVID. The selection of news topics and the applying of metaphors are important ways to frame and construct a countries’ image.

First, US newspapers displayed a considerably high degree of politicization and polarization in their COVID-19 coverage. Most of NYT news articles tend to criticize China’s COVID measures and express their negative attitudes towards China’s economy and other aspects in the time of COVID. This has echoed with Yuan (2023)’s claim that the COVID-19 news has been politicized and used for ideological interests and Wen et al. (2020)’s argument that COVID-19 has been correlated with the rise in prejudice and discrimination against diverse groups of people, for instance, Chinese and Asian people.

Second, the Chinese newspaper attempts to construct the image of Chinese government as “robust”, “people-centered”, “active in cooperation and collaboration”. CD tends to report Chinese people’s collective efforts in fighting against COVID and its progresses made during the fight. Our findings in this study align with those of Gong and Firdaus (2022), who pinpointed that it was unsurprising that China Daily produced many positive topics and themes in collectivist China where the CPC advocates collective communicative actions and social harmony as a national strategy to solve problems and achieve social and individual well-being.

Third, the media is extremely powerful in representing and constructing the real world from a particular perspective, which helps to shape opinions and convey ideology, and discourse, including news discourse, is a common social practice influence by ideology (Van Dijk, 2011; Van Dijk, 2013). The COVID-19 provides a particular context for crisis reporting and for constructing national identities in the press and national newspapers play a critical role in promulgating ideology.

Last, in the time of infodemic, which is described as a parallel tsunami of accurate and inaccurate information (Kim et al., 2020; Gruzd et al., 2021) and has demonstrated equal destruction as the pandemic itself. Infodemic cannot be eliminated but can be managed, i.e. we need to be concerned with both misinformation and true information to manage infodemic.

Conclusion

With an aim to unravel media framing in the time of pandemic, this study sets out to analyze news articles related to China fighting against COVID in NYT and CD respectively, which demonstrates not only similarities, but also differences as far as topic preferences and metaphors are concerned. This study inevitably has some limitations, for instance, both topic preferences and the use of metaphors are only part of a whole picture. Second, our findings were based on news articles from NYT and CD, however, newspaper in other countries and regions were excluded from the analysis. In the future, analysis from other perspectives, for instance, the literal frames based on a larger collection of corpus can be conducted to enhance our understanding of media framing in the time of pandemic.

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Note:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Author contributions

XR: conceptualization, methodology, funding acquisition, formal analysis, writing-original draft, review and editing.

ZL: formal analysis and writing-review and editing.

Funding information

This manuscript was published with financial support from Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning of Anhui province (NO. AHSKQ2020D188).

Author bio

Xiaolei Ruan holds her PhD in linguistics and she's an associate professor and a master supervisor at School of Foreign Studies, Anhui University.

Zisheng Liu is a master degree student at School of Foreign Studies, Anhui University and his research interests are applied linguistics and foreign language education.