

COVID 19-The Foreign Virus: Media Bias, Ideology and Dominance in Chinese and American Newspaper Articles

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ABSTRACT

This contrastive study examines media bias, media ideologies and dominance in two newspaper articles that are published by the American Washington Post newspaper and the Chinese People's Daily newspaper on COVID 19. The study reveals that media bias is practiced through gatekeeping bias, coverage bias and statement bias. Ideology bias is practiced through the selection of topics to cover and the tone for reporting on these topics. Dominance is practiced through the foregrounding and backgrounding of information and ideas. This contrastive study also reveals that the topics that are foregrounded by the American newspaper are backgrounded or filtered by the Chinese newspaper and the topics that are backgrounded by the American newspaper are foregrounded by the Chinese newspaper. This paper also reveals that foregrounding is not necessarily carried out explicitly; it can also be carried implicitly by foregrounding the opposite. The paper suggests that proper reading of media texts requires critical discourse analysis in terms of interpretation and contextual awareness in terms of knowledge. This is the case as the intended meaning of media texts is communicated between the lines.

Key words: Media Bias, Ideology Bias, Dominance, Critical Discourse Analysis, Mass Media

INTRODUCTION

Late in 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, China, a new infectious disease was identified. This infectious disease, which swiftly spread all over the world, was commonly named COVID 19. As of now, 209 countries worldwide reported confirmed cases of COVID 19. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it, on the 11th of March 2020, a pandemic. Eyes have turned to the prospect of a vaccine. However, even though laboratories and medical institutions are assiduous to create a vaccine, their efforts are not abundantly successful. This, maybe out of frustration, led into a war of words and an exchange of blames. In this study, I will not suggest a vaccine, as I am not a medical specialist; I will analyze the war of words on Coronavirus in Chinese and American mass media texts.

In a Tweet on the 12th of March, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman suggested that the US military might have brought Coronavirus to the Chinese city of Wuhan. This tweet was not received well and a war of words started between a number of American newspapers and a number of Chinese newspapers. In this article, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) onto a newspaper article that was published on the 20th of March, 2020, in Washington Post titled 'Don't blame 'China' for the coronavirus-blame the Chinese Communist Party and another newspaper article that was published by the People's Daily newspaper-English edition on the 19th of March, 2020, titled 'Don't fall for it! Trump is using "Chinese Virus" label to cover up his

mishandling of coronavirus. The main objective of this contrastive study is to examine media bias, ideology and dominance in Chinese and American mass media texts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is mainly a contrastive study. A number of research articles have targeted cross-cultural English and Chinese (AlAfnan, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a/2019b; Kong, 2005; Scollon, 2000; Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Wei, 2006; Zhu, 2000) texts. However, it is obvious that these studies "are far from enough to establish an overall picture of writing practices in these two languages" (Wei, 2006, pp 1-2). It is widely reported, especially in the facets of Fairclough's (1995) CDA, that the production of media texts depends on economic, political and cultural factors. According to Fairclough (1995), "an account of communication in the mass media must consider the economics and politics of the mass media: the nature of the market which the mass media are operating within, and their relationship to the state, and so forth" (p. 36). That is, the economic values relate to who owns or finances the agency, the political facet depends on the power and ideology of the media, whereas the cultural facet depends on 'the issues of value' in the community. Examining the influence of these three facets on the production of newspaper articles regarding COVID 19 in American and Chinese mass media texts would be interesting as these two countries belong to different ideologies. The US, a democratic country, has supported,

at least ostensibly, the movement to democracy in the world. The Chinese political system, however, is a single-party regime that has governed China since 1949. As such, examining the economic, political and cultural values affecting the production of media texts in these two countries would produce a “truly thick” description of how bias, ideology and dominance influence the construction of mass media texts.

To examine the above-mentioned factors, Fairclough (1995) suggested examining the text, discourse and socio-cultural practices. Text practice analysis targets the vocabulary, grammar, and the cohesion organization of the communicative event. Discourse practice, however, “straddles the division between society and culture on the one hand, and discourse, language and text on the other” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 60). That is, examining discourse practice should consider the process of producing and consumption of texts. It also includes the institutional process and discourse processes. The socio-cultural practice, however, shall look at, according to Fairclough (1995), the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of a communicative event. Conducting CDA on a communicative event, however, does not need to examine all these practices as the analysis could be carried out on the focuses that “be relevant to understanding the particular event” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 62).

Given that the main focus of this study is examining media bias, ideology, and dominance in newspaper articles pertaining to ‘COVID 19’ in a couple of American and Chinese newspapers, the focus will be drawn to two main practices that are the text and the socio-cultural practices. In examining the text practices, the focus will be drawn to the vocabularies used when reporting about COVID 19 in these articles. The importance of examining vocabulary or the linguistic choices in a communicative event arises as the linguistic choice, according to Fowler and Hodge (1979, p. 188), is “principled and systematic”. In conducting the socio-cultural and socio-political practice analysis, however, the focus will be drawn to the economic values of newspapers and the political and cultural values of the country of origin in which the newspaper is based. The political dimension will be examined in relation to the official stand of the country towards COVID 19 as reported in local media; the cultural dimension, however, will be examined by looking at the ‘issues of value’ in the country of origin.

The main purpose for examining these texts using CDA is that CDA is an approach to discourse analysis that aims at examining the use of language in everyday communication whether it is spoken or written. It views language as a social practice (Halliday, 1979) that does not only signify other social practices, but also constitute elements like dominance, resistance, power and ideology (Atkins, 2002). For Chuliaraki and Fairclough (1999), conducting CDA “of a communicative interaction sets out to show that the semiotic and linguistic features of the interaction are systematically connected with what is going on socially, and what is going on socially is indeed going on partly or wholly semiotically or linguistically.” (113).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate how American and Chinese writers construct their newspaper articles concerning COVID 19. It struggles to examine the elements of media

bias, ideology, and dominance in language use in the selected articles to expose how the writers manipulate the topic to outfit the interests in the respective countries. This will definitely include examining the economic, political and cultural values of the newspapers and the country in general.

In order to achieve the aims of the study, a couple of newspaper articles are collected: an article from an American newspaper and an article from a Chinese newspaper (English edition). The American article is collected from the well-known Washington Post and the Chinese articles is collected from People’s Daily: English Edition, which circulates around 200,000 daily copies. The articles are collected electronically from the website of the abovementioned newspapers.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the mixing of CDA and CL. CDA assists identifying “the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). This includes the conflict of ideologies as of “Us and Them ... We are Good and They are Bad” (Van Dijk, 1998 p. 25). The use of CL, however, assists in creating credibility and trustworthiness to the findings of the study, as the researcher attempts collecting a specialized corpus that is representative of the text type (Hunston, 2002). In this sense, the analytical framework will look into the textual and contextual analysis. The textual analysis will examine the vocabularies used in the texts and their semantic and pragmatic significance in presenting writers’ view. The contextual analysis, however, will examine the economic, political and cultural values for the newspapers, on the one hand, and the interest in the country of origin, on the other.

ANALYSIS

This analysis will look into the newspapers and their political, economic and cultural values. Through the examination of these values, we will be able to comprehend the motive behind the linguistic choices.

The Newspapers

The two news papers selected for this study are the American Washington Post and the Chinese People’s Daily.

The Washington Post is a major daily newspaper in the US. It was founded in 1877. It circulates around 447,000 newspapers a day as it also has more than a million digital subscribers, according to Fitcher (2013). The newspaper, which won 47 Pulitzer Prizes, is owned by Nash Holdings, a holding company established by Jeff Bezos, the wealthiest person on earth and the owner of Amazon. Eisinger, Veenstra, and Koehn (2009), after examining news articles from 1991 to 2004, came up with a conclusion that the Washington Post is neither conservative nor liberal newspaper. However, this finding came after investigating the number of published advertisements for Republican and Democrat senators and congressmen. That is, the newspaper is neither conservative nor liberal locally. However, when it comes to dealing with news or accusations that are external, this stand may change.

The People’s Daily, however, belongs to the largest media group in China with more than 3 million readers. Its’ English edition has more than 200,000 readers per day. The newspaper was founded in 1948 and is managed by the Central Committee

of the Communist Party of China. However, even though the English edition of the People's Daily is managed by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it is believed that it aspires to have a Western journalism style (Wang and Lee, 2014). That is, the English edition of the People's Daily is unlike the Chinese edition which is very patriotic in reporting events. It targets international audience and strives to report events neutrally. However, even if the newspaper adopts a neutral discourse in reporting, being a member of a national (governmental) media corporation would require a stern reaction to claims and accusations that some people, inside and outside China, regarded as offensive. This would lead into a more emotional and patriotic style to reflect the nature of the event.

The Selected Articles

As mentioned above, two articles were selected for the sake of this study- An article from Washington Post and an article from the People's Daily- English edition.

The Washington Post's article was published on the 20th of March, 2020, and titled 'Don't blame 'China' for the coronavirus — blame the Chinese Communist Party'. The writer of this article reserved the right of the American administration and the American public to respond to the Chinese accusations that Coronavirus was brought to China by the American military. However, at the same time, the writer asked the government and the people to be a little bit more sensitive in expressing opinions as the accusations may spark racism and "stigmatize Chinese citizens or Chinese Americans". Even though the writer asked the readers to stop labeling Coronavirus as the "Chinese Virus", the "Wuhan Virus" or the "Kong Flu", he labeled it as the "CCP Virus" in reference to the Chinese Communist Party.

The article also praised Chinese researchers, scientists, doctors, nurses, and journalists but attacked the Chinese ruling party. The writers claimed that the Chinese regime is a source of oppression, aggression and bad influence. He also stated that the Chinese people do not influence the actions of the Chinese government. The writer also asked the readers to learn a lesson from the Russian interference in the American elections back in 2016 and asked the readers to avoid falling to the attempts of the CCP to divide the Americans.

The article that was selected from the People's Daily is titled 'Don't fall for it! Trump is using "Chinese Virus" label to cover up his mishandling of coronavirus'. The article, which was published on the 19th of March, 2020, highlights the labeling of the COVID 19-coronavirus as the 'Chinese Virus' by the American administration. The article also highlighted using other labels that intend to "smear China". These labels, according to the article, inflame anti-Chinese racism and stigmatizing China. The writer of the article also quoted a number of Chinese American journalists who felt offended by the labeling of the coronavirus as the Chinese Virus, the Wuhan Virus and the King Flu. The newspaper also highlighted international reactions to this labeling, which was described by the newspapers as racist and anti-Chinese.

The article of the People's Daily also claimed that the American administration comes up with the labeling to deflect the attention of the people from the failure and the mishandling of the situation. The newspaper cited the number of COVID 19 confirmed cases and the number of COVID 19 related

deaths in the US. It remarked that the situation will worsen in the coming weeks as, according to an American research center, the overwhelming majority of the confirmed cases in the US are located in big American metropolitan cities.

Media Bias

Media bias can be divided in three categories. Firstly, gatekeeping bias, which refers to reporting on a certain topic from a pool of available topics. Secondly, coverage bias, which refers to the unbalanced reporting on a topic or an event. Thirdly, statement bias, which refers to inserting writers' own opinion when reporting on an event. The two selected newspaper articles have evidences of the three types of media bias.

In relation to gatekeeping bias, it is evident that the fight against COVID 19 in these two articles has moved from the medical arena to the political arena. Even though people around the world get infected every single second and people from different nationalities and ethnicities pass away every single minute, the writers of these two articles found time to politicize the pandemic. The blame game is evident in the article published in Washington Post, "Don't blame China, blame the Chinese Communist Party", in which the writer attacked the ruling party in China. The People's Daily, on the other hand, responded to labeling COVID 19

Coverage bias can also be evident in both articles. The article of Washington Post calls people to blame the CCP and "its internal repression, its external aggression" and rejected accusations of racism. However, in the body of the article, the writer repeatedly used three nicknames of Corona 19 that are "the Chinese Virus", "Wuhan Virus" and "Kong Flu". In communication and media studies, this is called mainstreaming. That is, intentional or unintentional repetitions of a viewpoint would create a public opinion. To avoid mainstreaming, we need to avoid using terms that would possibly lead to portraying something in a certain manner. On the other hand, the article that was published by the People's Daily assumes American failure in dealing with the threat as a result of mishandling the situation. This was presumed as there were 7000 COVID 19 confirmed cases in the US in comparison to more than 75000 confirmed cases in China. The number of deaths was 100 in the US in comparison to 20000 in China. Even though the number of COVID 19 confirmed cases increased drastically in the US after the 19th of March, the day in which the article was published, the Daily had no solid evidence of failing to deal with the virus. Additionally, the Daily portrayed nicknaming the virus by some quarters in the US as racist, but it did not refer to the Tweet of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Spokesman who accused the American military of bringing the virus to Wuhan.

In regards to statement bias, the Daily's and the Post's articles are full of opinions that are inserted into the articles. In the Daily's article, even though the writer maintains the formal reporting style, which is based on neutral reporting, he focused on one side of the coin. He only referred to offensive labeling and racist comments. This was foregrounded throughout the article. However, to maintain this streamline, the writer backgrounded several calls from the US, including major news agencies and politicians who criticized this labeling. This made it sound as if the overwhelming majority of the public agrees with that labeling. In the Posts' article, however, the writer

maintained the use of the inclusive ‘we’ and ‘us’ against the ‘they’ and ‘them’, which almost always referred to the CCP. The ‘we’ against ‘they’ stand in reporting reflects statement bias as the writer takes a clear stand in support of the ‘we’ against the stand or the practices of the ‘them’. The writer of the Washington Post’s article asked the ‘we’ to stop labeling the virus as the ‘Chinese virus’ for the sake of unity, but he labeled the virus as the “CCP virus” as they, the rulers of Beijing, are “the malign influence”, according to the writer.

Ideology

Examining ideology in media texts can be demonstrated in the selected topics for reporting and the angle of or the tone for reporting.

To start with the selected topics, it is noticed that the Washington Post’s article is diverting the attention or the blame to the government of China. Using the inclusive ‘we’ the writer tries to comfort the readers, including the Chinese and Asian Americans, that they are not the problem. The problem is with the Chinese authorities as they are unfair and cause a lot of trouble for the local Chinese and the international community. He praised the people of China and labeled them as heroes, but diminished their rulers, which has “malign influence in free and open societies”. That is, CCP, according to the writer, is aggressive and undemocratic. After labeling Corona 19 virus as the Chinese Virus, the Wuhan Virus and the Kong Flu by some quarters in the US, the writer is trying to comfort the Chinese and Asian Americans by prompting inclusiveness and unity as CCP, according to the writer, is trying to “divide us (Americans) along political, ethnic and racial lines”.

The article strives to comfort the Chinese, in general, and the Chinese Americans, in particular, by excluding the common Chinese people from the labeling by labeling the virus as the ‘CCP virus’. That’s is, the Chinese government is not representative of the Chinese people—the government was not selected through democratic means. The writer is trying to tell them (the Chinese) that you are not the Chinese we mean. The Chinese we talk about are the ones involved in the government. This can be noticed in the examples used to comfort the Chinese reader and appeal to the un-Chinese reader. The writer of the Washington Post’s articles appealed to the public using the ‘values’ and the ‘ideologies’ that the target audience (Americans) believes in—democracy and inclusiveness. In general terms, Americans value and believe in democracy and democratic practices. They stand against authoritarian and autocratic systems. Starting from here, the writer targeted the CCP for its’, according to the writer, aggression, oppression and malign influence. As such, the conflict of ideologies is between democratic and autocratic policies and beliefs among political systems and people.

In the People Daily’s article, however, the target is the outsiders, mainly American voters. The article emphasizes that labeling the virus as Chinese intends to divert attention and manipulate opinion, especially that the American administration failed in containing the virus. It mishandled it. The phrase “Don’t fall for it” intends to create a public opinion. The word “mishandling” would also create a negative influence and reaction among readers especially that the human ‘values’ of well-being, and safety are under threat as they ‘were not safeguarded’ by the Administration, according to the article. The picture

which accompanied the article portrays the president as an unconfident person supports the title that the one who labeled the virus as ‘Chinese’ is diverting attention as he failed to contain the virus. The usage of words like “defending”, “deflect”, “failure” also creates negative emotions and negative impressions.

The writer of the People Daily’s article through the selection of topics, the tone of reporting on the topic and the appeal to human values is trying to create a public opinion. Besides, by highlighting the mishandling of the pandemic by the American administration, the writer implies the successful practices of the Chinese government in handling the pandemic and containing it. That is, it implicitly praised the efficient and successful handling of COVID 19 by the Chinese authorities. Efficiency is one of the highly appreciated values in China.

As such, media ideologies are apparent in the two articles for two different goals. The Washington Post’s article by attacking the ‘aggressive practices’ of the Chinese authorities in China highlights democratic practices and democracy in the US. The People Daily’s article, through the highlight of the racial comments and the mishandling of the medical crisis, tries to appeal to human values that are championed by humankind: efficiency and equality.

Domination

The investigation into domination is carried out through foregrounding and backgrounding events in the two articles.

Looking into the Washington Post’s article, we notice that the writer foregrounded the “aggression” and the “repression” of the Chinese government, but backgrounded how well they reacted in fighting the virus. The writer did not mention the decreased number of new cases of COVID 19 in China. He did not refer or backgrounded the firm measurements that were taken by the authorities to cure more than 75% of confirmed COVID19 cases in China. The writer did not mention or backgrounded all the efforts to fight the virus in China and the world. This backgrounding intended to diminish the efforts of the Chinese government in reacting to the pandemic and focusing on or foregrounding political situations during this difficult time. The only praise the writer provided is to the doctors and nurses forgetting that they do not work independently without supervision or directions from formal authorities. This foregrounding and backgrounding in the Post’s article intended to highlight wrongdoings and lessen the right doings. The reason is to implicitly create an impression among Asian and Chinese readers that they are not intended by the labeling that circulates around. The government is intended.

In People Daily’s article, however, the “failing” in addressing the danger and the use of “racist” labeling is foregrounded. The relatively small number of confirmed cases in the US (on the 19th of March 2020) is backgrounded. The writer foregrounded “racism” to create a public opinion about the administration which leads one of the most multiracial countries in the world. This foregrounding has taken place to create a public opinion especially that the administration will run for elections in less than 9 months. If the newspaper managed to create this public opinion, the chance of this administration to win the next general elections will decrease, which might possibly be the target. The writer of the article backgrounded that the one who started the blame game is a Chinese Foreign

Ministry official who suggested that the virus was brought by the American military. It is noticed that the reaction was foregrounded, but the action was backgrounded. In fact, the action that was the reason behind the American reaction was not mentioned at all.

As such, we notice that the labeling of COVID 19 as the Chinese virus, Wuhan Virus, and Kong Flu was foregrounded in the People Daily's article to create a negative hollow among Asian Americans, but it was backgrounded in the Washington Post's article and was replaced by the labeling of "CCP Virus" to create a positive impression among Asian and Chinese Americans. On the other hand, the success of the Chinese authorities was backgrounded in the Washington Post's article to diminish their achievements in fighting COVID 19, but it was implicitly foregrounded in the People Daily's article by exposing and foregrounding the mishandling of COVID 19 by the American administration.

CONCLUSION

This article investigated media bias, ideologies and dominance in two newspaper articles that were published by the American Washington Post newspaper and the Chinese People's Daily (English Edition) newspapers. The article revealed that the writers through the selection of topics, the tone of reporting, mainstreaming, manipulation, foregrounding and backgrounding communicate bias opinions, ideologies and practice dominance. By examining these two articles on COVID 19, it was revealed that the topics that were foregrounded by the American newspaper were backgrounded by the Chinese newspaper and the topics that were backgrounded by the American newspaper were foregrounded by the Chinese newspaper. As such, a proper reading of media texts requires critical discourse analysis in terms of interpretation and contextual knowledge to properly read the explicit and implicit meaning intended by writers.

END NOTES

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/dont-blame-china-for-the-coronavirus--blame-the-chinese-communist-party/2020/03/19/343153ac-6a12-11ea-abef-02f086a3fab_story.html
2. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0319/c90000-9670125.html>

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