

MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Chapter 12

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Runya Qiaoan and Beatrice Gallelli

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Chinese Media Reports in the Covid-19 Crisis*

Runya Qiaoan and Beatrice Gallelli

Introduction

At the earlier stage of the Covid-19 epidemic, the liberal market media in the People's Republic of China (PRC) were allowed to tell a different story from the official line. Yet, this unsanctioned story that could harm the Party-State's legitimacy was quickly marginalised and replaced by an official media's counter-narrative celebrating the Chinese Party-State's responsive governance (Repnikova, 2020). How did it happen? How far can the market media go in time of crisis? How could the official media remould a story of disaster into a story of victory? To answer these questions, we carry out a comparative analysis of a Covid-19 report from *Caixin*, a liberal market-oriented newspaper, and a video-report by *CCTV*, the Chinese Party-State's mouthpiece. Combining frame analysis as applied to news discourse (Reese, 2007) with critical multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), this chapter examines the representation of the main protagonists in the Covid-19 crisis – i.e. local and central governments and medical professionals – and the settings, e.g. scenarios in the hospitals. The analysis demonstrates that regardless of the two sources' similarities in emphasising good governance from the central government, they diverge in terms of how the other protagonists and the management of the crisis are framed.

This study, on the one hand, contributes to our understanding of the limitation and agency of market media in times of crisis, demonstrating that as long as the legitimisation of the central government and the socialist system remains unchallenged, the market media has ample amount of freedom in its crisis investigation. On the other hand, it provides insights into the official media's crisis propaganda

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and the tactics used to boost “disaster nationalism” (Zhang, 2020, p. 163), showing how the Party-State embedded the narration of its responsive deeds into a kind of responsive report to legitimise its rule.

In the following parts, we will first present our theoretical background, detailing an established distinction between Party journalism and market journalism. After that, we introduce our data selection and data analysis methods. Following this methodological account, we move on to our analytical results, showing how the protagonists are presented respectively in *Caixin* and *CCTV*. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the findings and their implications on the media control strategy in the Xi era.

Theoretical Background: Media in China

Party Journalism and Market Journalism

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) approach to media has been traditionally shaped by Leninist theories, according to which media are instrumental in organising the collective and “freedom of criticism” may undermine unity. Moving from the Leninist approach, in the Maoist era, media functioned as the “eyes, ears, tongue, and throat of the Party” (Brady, 2017, p. 128–129) and were fully funded by State subsidies.

Following the “market turn” in 1978, media has been intended “to serve both the State and the market” (Stockmann, 2013, p. 50). State subsidies were cut as early as 1978 and media were thus encouraged to resort to advertising as alternative sources of funding. The self-sufficiency of the media, together with an enlarging commodity market, resulted in the expansion of the media marketplace. However, the commodity nature of the press was acknowledged for the first time only in 1992.

The lesson learnt from the collapse of the Soviet Union, where economic stagnation was deemed a major cause (Shambaugh, 2008, p. 81), together with the Tian’an Men Incident,¹ pushed the new leadership to, on the one hand, further free market forces, on the other hand, renovate the propaganda technics (Brady, 2008, pp. 65–85). The reforms implemented in the 1990s were thus carried out with a twofold aim in mind: pushing the media outlet to become economically self-sufficient (Stockmann, 2013), while rendering the “main melody” attractive in order to “guide” (*yindao* 引导) public opinion (Brady, 2008, p. 50). The very beginning of the new millennium has seen a further acceleration of the commercialisation of the media to let them compete with foreign news outlets (Shirk, 2011, p. 9). The result has been a fragmentation of media marketplace. Stockmann (2013, p. 50–73) distinguishes between official and commercialised media, according to their degree of marketisation, though neither can be deemed completely independent from the State (all the media in China are still majority-owned by the State). Almost all commercialised media are part of a media group led by the Party or the government newspaper; however, since their survival in the market depends on their selling, commercial newspapers are more reactive to public demands. Moreover, it

is worth pointing out that, instead of being a threat for the Party-State rule, commercial media, as a medium for societal feedback, are instrumental in the Party-State “responsive authoritarianism” in the PRC (Stockmann, 2013), at least during the Hu-Wen era² (Qiaoan & Teets, 2020).

Media under Xi Jinping

Soon after being appointed president, in August 2013, Xi Jinping urged the media to spread “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang* 正能量). The expression “positive energy” is essentially a restyle of “emphasise positive propaganda” featuring Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras. Yet, terminological innovation soon followed, as some official newspapers began to discuss the need to win the “war on public opinion” (*yulun douzheng* 舆论斗争). A series of measures that tightened control over the information sphere followed: September 2013 saw a crackdown on *Weibo* and other Chinese social media; in November of the same year, the registration process for journalists was tightened by introducing an exam involving the study of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”; in January 2015, after assuming the leadership of a newly formed commission for the supervision and administration of cyberspace, Xi Jinping declared “Chinese sovereignty over the internet”, blocking the use of several VPNs (virtual private networks) used to bypass the Great Firewall (Brady, 2017, p. 135–138). In 2016, Xi Jinping made a high-profile tour to the country’s top three State-run media outlets, urging editors and reporters to pledge “absolute loyalty” to the CCP. This tour anticipated his remarks at a meeting held in the afternoon when Xi Jinping spelt out that the “media run by the Party have the Party as their family name” (Associated Press, 2017).

Although political stability has always been the key objective in media management, Xi’s approach in achieving this goal is characterised, as Repnikova (2017, p. 207) notes, by “a more intensive deployment of repressive tools, combined with enhanced ideology-based propaganda work, and a more centralised model of upholding vertical accountability”. Repnikova goes as far as to suggest that “Xi’s approach resembles more the Putin-style personalistic governance than that of the Leninist one-party system” (2017, p. 219).

Method and Data Selection

Based on Stockmann’s distinction outlined above, we focused on the Covid-19 report from *Caixin*, a well-respected market-oriented newspaper, and a video-report by *CCTV*, one of the mouthpieces of the Chinese Party-State. *Caixin Media* is a Chinese media group known for investigative journalism. Its founder, Hu Shuli, is a former Knight Fellow in journalism at Stanford University and an honorary doctorate recipient from Princeton University. As a liberal-leaning media platform, *Caixin* earned its reputation for being outspoken in crisis report. *Caixin* was one of the first media to pay attention to the Covid-19 outbreak and offered many timely and in-depth reports. The material we chose to analyse in this chapter is a collective

report from 37 *Caixin* journalists, named “How did the new coronavirus come to this point? (*Xinguan bingdu heyizhici* 新冠病毒何以至此?)”, 2020. The report, released in February 2020 and counting 40,000 words in total, might be the most comprehensive journalistic documentation and investigation of the early days’ situation in Wuhan. The ten-episode video-report by *CCTV*, titled “The general secretary commands this people’s war” (*Zongshuji zhihui zhe chang renmin zhanzheng* 总书记指挥这场人民战争), was broadcasted online in March 2020. In November 2020, it was named one of the best video-report on the war against the epidemic at the China New Media Conference (*Zhongguo xin meiti da hui* 中国新媒体大会) (*Renmin Wang*, 2020). At this conference, Xu Lin, the vice-director of the Central Propaganda Department, guarded against the risk that digitalisation of Chinese media may “diluting the Party’s leadership”, urging to “resolutely prevent the risk of capital manipulating public opinion” (Baptista, 2020). These two points emphasised by Xu Lin reflect what has been called “Xi Jinping Thought on the News” (Bandurski, 2020). The video-report by *CCTV* can be thus deemed an example of the direction undertaken by official media in Xi Jinping’s “new era” in order to enhance their appeal in the era of digitalisation.

In order to systematically analyse storytelling and the representation of the crisis management by the two different kinds of media reports, we adopt a qualitative methodology that shares common ground with frame analysis (Goffman, 1986) as well as critical multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). While following the general approach of frame analysis according to which frames “set up categories, define some ideas as out and others in” (Reese, 2007, p. 150), we also focus on how different semiotic modes interact in the two reports. Specifically, we first coded the linguistic and visual materials of both the *Caixin* and the *CCTV* reports³ to gauge the main frames in each text. Secondly, we focused on the main actors, analysing how each of them is framed and how they interact with one another. We then compared the results, drawing similarities and differences between the representation of the crisis management in the two reports.

Results

Local and Central Governments: Whose Faults? Whose Merits?

The *Caixin* report explicitly pointed out that the Wuhan and Hubei governments should be held accountable for the epidemic crisis. According to the report, as early as 2018, the Wuhan citizens already complained about the hygiene problems around the seafood market to the municipal government, but no improvement was seen (p. 6). In early January 2020, while it was clear that the new virus can be highly contagious, the Wuhan (p. 8) and Hubei (p. 11) governments still gave priority to the local “two sessions” (the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) and downplayed the health crisis’ severity. Moreover, instead of swiftly reacting to the epidemic emergency, the leadership in Hubei even attended a spring festival celebration on January 21, which involved

a mass gathering of performers and audiences (p. 14). Besides, it also quoted virologists who complained about the abrupt shutdown and mass cleaning of the seafood market, which caused the loss of essential data for tracing the virus' origin (p. 31). In addition, it mentioned the side effect of a complete lockdown of the whole city – a lot of suspected cases are trapped at home, unable to find transportation to reach the hospital because of the traffic closure; or wandering outside the hospital, unable to obtain timely diagnosis (p. 25). The report summarised:

Looking back, [we can see] the virus has been spreading silently since at least late December 2019. Clinicians have reported promptly, and the internal information notification of the disease control system is relatively smooth, but there are obvious problems in information release and public management. The local medical government system had significant obstacles in understanding and managing suspected cases, which led to the failure of containing the rapid spread of the virus among the population.⁴

(p. 23)

Compared to such a clear investigation into the responsibility of the local governments, *Caixin's* discussion on that of the central government seems to be much more ambiguous. It acknowledged the central government's effort in the epidemic control, mentioning a timely visit of Premier Li Keqiang to Wuhan in late January (p. 3). It also quoted the paramount leader Xi Jinping's guidance – to treat “the people's life safety and physical health as the top priority (*renmin qunzhong de shengming anquan he shenti jiankang fang zai di yi wei* 人民群众的生命安全和身体健康放在第一位)” (p. 12) and cited the WHO's compliment towards China's crisis management (p. 35–36), which resembles the *CCTV* narrative we will discuss later on. However, reading between the lines, *Caixin* readers can tell that the central government is not entirely innocent. For example, the former deputy director of the China Centres for Disease Control and Prevention told a *Caixin* journalist:

After the SARS epidemic in 2003, China has spent a lot of money establishing a direct reporting system that can achieve rapid monitoring. In fact, there is a clear mechanism to deal with unknown pneumonia in China. It is important to distinguish between two things: neglect of the experts and no action after the experts' report.

(p. 18)

Such a statement implicitly pointed to the liability of the decision-makers, who should have been informed long ago but failed to act until it was too late. Since it is no secret that the local officials often had to wait for the central government's endorsement for any significant actions, such a quote sheds light on the responsibility of the central government, or even that of the top leaders.

In contrast to the *Caixin* report, the *CCTV* video-report completely ignored the local governments' mishandling during the initial phase of the crisis. The same

goes for the China Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, which is not even mentioned *en passant*.

Since its first episode, the *CCTV* video-report depicted the handling of the situation as appropriate and effective thanks to Xi's "personal management" (*qinzi zhihui*, *qinzi bushu* 亲自指挥, 亲自部署 literally "personally command and deploy [troops]"), as it is specified several times. Number two in Party's political hierarchy, Li Keqiang, never appears, though he visited Wuhan long before Xi Jinping, who went there only in March. Xi Jinping represents the main protagonist of the entire *CCTV* video-report, whose successful management of the crisis is reasoned by the huge amount of aid provided to Wuhan by the central government through the People's Liberation Army. Seven out of ten episodes start with an aeroplane landing in Wuhan, followed by images of soldiers offloading the aid. Moreover, interviews and press-conferences released by a number of Chinese and foreign experts – such as the US virologist Peter Daszak – and key foreign representatives of international organisations further sustain the idea of an effective control over the crisis. Amid them, the words spelt out by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the general director of WHO, explicitly refers to Xi Jinping's capacity in leading the country out from the epidemiological emergency:

I would praise China again and again, because its actions actually helped in reducing the spread of the coronavirus to other countries. The commitment of the political leadership, starting from the number one, from the president Xi Jinping himself, [...], the level of his knowledge is very very amazing.

Comments by foreign experts legitimise the *CCTV* storytelling and leave the impression that China's central government is relaying a consensus among foreign and Chinese scientists in a neutral and factual way.

Besides praising China's central government, some of the foreign actors express their gratitude towards Chinese leaders. The seventh episode contains an interview with the Italian Deputy Minister of Health, Pierpaolo Sileri, expressing his thanks to China for providing information about the virus timely and setting the model on how to manage the epidemic. Sileri's words are followed by shots depicting China's aid arrival in Italy, and the episode continues with medical workers and patients in Africa. China's aid to foreign countries depicts China as not only a responsible country for its own people but also a charitable power for global wellbeing.

Health Workers: "War Heroes" or Victims?

Health workers are covered extensively in both reports, but the two differ substantially on how they are depicted. In the *Caixin* report, medical professionals appear to be ordinary human beings who are emotional and vulnerable. The doctors are often described as being "shocked" upon realising the seriousness of the new virus. For example, the report mentioned that after Dr. Liu reported to *Caixin* journalists the number of cases – 143 out of 200 turned out to be suspected cases in the past

24 hours – “he could not help but burst into tears” (p. 14). In another scenario, Dr. Li was described as counting the number of CT scans showing lung infection with “trembling hands and remained silent long afterward” (p. 20). In both cases, the readers do not see brave and strong heroes; instead, they see ordinary, vulnerable, and emotional human beings who are as shocked or scared as everyone else. Besides, *Caixin* also reported in detail how the frontline medical workers fell ill. As early as January 6, a respiratory physician who had never been to the seafood market was diagnosed with lung infection, confirming the virus can spread among people, but he and his colleagues were instructed not to leak out the information “so as not to cause social panic (*yimian zaocheng shehui konghuang* 以免造成社会恐慌)” (p. 9). In another case, a neurologist’s lung scan was described as “full of shadows like being hit by bullets” (p. 9). An otorhinolaryngologist was reported passing away on January 25 due to lung infection, becoming the first medical worker who died of Covid-19 (p. 9). Taken together, these narrations do not construct the medical doctors as bulletproof war heroes; instead, they look more like war victims shot by bullets both in the form of a fatal virus and in the form of ill policies.

However, such a humanistic approach in depicting health workers does not leave readers the impression that they are weak. Instead, it can be argued that they look even more respectful as vulnerable human beings who stand up for their patients despite their fear. In one case, a doctor told a *Caixin* journalist that witnessing the disastrous situation, he could not help thinking “what would the situation be like if he was brave enough to stand up earlier?” He felt a sense of guilt for “not risking his life to speak truth to power (*pin si shang jian* 拼死上谏)” (p. 17). Such portrayal shows beautifully the human side of the doctor who looked intensely real to the readers. This kind of narration is not often seen in socialist-style journalism. As a liberal media outlet, *Caixin* seems to be consciously distinguishing itself from the conventional hero-constructing journalism commonly seen during China’s crisis report. However, as we can imagine, the official *CCTV* narrative fell back to the conventional track.

The *CCTV* video-report frame medical workers as heroes, whose endeavours in fighting the disease demonstrate the Party’s political commitment. By means of both linguistic and visual devices, medical workers’ efforts were attributed to their pursuit of the communist ideology. In more than one episode, groups of doctors are portrayed with their right fist raised, symbolising their faith in communism and their loyalty to the Party. In his interview, Zhu Wentao, from Tongji Hospital in Wuhan, goes even further by specifying that “90% of our frontline medical staff are Party members”. The episode that includes this interview is titled “great political parties take on responsibilities” (*da dang dandang* 大党担当) and is entirely dedicated to the CCP’s political commitment and ideology, reflected in the gestures of actors and the symbols of hammer and sickle. In addition, health workers are militarised in this “people’s war” (*renmin zhanzheng* 人民战争) through terminology such as “white-coated troops” (*bai yi zhanshi* 白衣战士 or *baiyi zhijia* 白衣执甲).

In the official media, health workers embody the quintessential “socialist hero”, completely devoted to the political ideal. Meanwhile, consistent with the trend

of “reform era propaganda”, they are also “normalised”, becoming the kind of “everyday hero” that anyone can become by simply doing his/her job (Chen, 2014, p. 10). This is in stark contrast to the liberal market-media report by *Caixin*. Indeed, most of the photos that appeared in the *Caixin* report were shot from the back of the patients and doctors, leaving readers the feeling that both the patients and the doctors were caught off guard, like vulnerable soldiers attacked from the back in this ill-prepared battle.

In and Out of Hospitals: Setting the Stage, Setting the Narrative

If reading the *Caixin* report, you see the chaotic scenes in Wuhan hospitals during the epidemic’s early days. In one hospital, it is said that even though temporary respiratory infectious disease isolation wards were built, they were far from enough (p. 7). In another hospital, it is described that hundreds of patients crowded in the small hall, and the hallway was transformed into a temporary transfusion room, full of patients receiving intravenous drip (p. 16). Inside these hospitals full of stressful doctors and patients, the picture is, understandably, not always harmonious and peaceful. Some patients were seen scolding the doctor because they could not be admitted to the hospital due to the shortage of wards, and some emotional patients even hammered the glass door with their hands to show their desperation (p. 16). These patients have the reason to be desperate: some of them told the *Caixin* journalists that they had been lining up here for almost 24 hours but still did not get their registration numbers for a check (p. 17). However, the doctors are equally helpless – many of them have been working non-stop for days without seeing their own families (p. 17). In addition to these chaotic scenes inside the hospitals, *Caixin* also reported the testing problems during the early days. Many suspected cases who should have been tested could not be due to the shortage of testing kits (p. 22); the tested have to wait for three to five days to get the results (p. 24). Such a shortage and delay, no wonder, adds to the frustration of the patients and doctors.

In the *CCTV* video-report, instead, hospitals are depicted as perfectly in order, with smiling medical workers, fully equipped with safety protection devices, taking care of cheerful patients. A number of doctors and patients are portrayed with their thumb up, symbolising that the crisis is well under control.

Besides, the *CCTV* video-report placed great emphasis on the building of two new hospitals in Wuhan in just a few days. The speed in which the hospitals were built and, more generally the entire crisis was placed under control, is a proof of the superiority of the Chinese political system, according to the official narrative. To further strengthen this narrative, the *CCTV* video-report dedicates an entire episode to the “war against poverty”. Eradicating absolute poverty in rural areas has been one of the key goals of Xi Jinping, meant to be achieved by 2020, in time for the centenary of the CCP’s foundation. In the episode, with images of Xi Jinping surrounded by people benefiting from China’s poverty alleviation programs, a male voice rises: “Our country will reach the targets set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ten years ahead”. In December

2020, Xi declared that the task of poverty alleviation has been accomplished as scheduled (Xie & Zhang, 2020) and, soon afterwards, this goal was defined as a “world miracle” (*shijie qiji* 世界奇迹) (Liu, 2020). Using the concept of “miracle” is not a random choice; instead, it is a well-established discursive technic in Chinese politics that goes back to Mao’s time. In terms of discursive functions, “miracles are”, as Sorace maintains, “successful shifts of cognition, attitude, and practice, ways of realigning how people understand their society and the role of government” (Sorace, 2017, p. 18). Therefore, the entire *CCTV* video-report not only supports the Party’s resilience in front of the epidemiological crisis, but also contributes to its moral authority by sanctifying its values and showing its capacity to keep its words despite all the obstacles.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that despite the two sources’ similarities in emphasising good governance from the central government, their framing of the other protagonists is largely different. Specifically, while *Caixin* focuses on the local governments’ liability, *CCTV* focuses on the central government’s responsiveness. While *Caixin* presents doctors as vulnerable human beings, *CCTV* presents doctors as the CCP heroes. While *Caixin* does not shun away from the chaos and frustration in hospitals, *CCTV* shifts the focus to cheerful patients taken care of by doctors and governments. Moreover, while *CCTV* relies on military metaphors to present a grandiose narration of the “great people’s war”, *Caixin* avoids such metaphors to show a more humanitarian approach in storytelling.

One thing worth mentioning is that the *CCTV* video-report was released a month after the *Caixin* report. Therefore, the official voice sounds like a counter-narrative that intends to “correct” the unsanctioned story. Interestingly, while the *Caixin* narration – reporting the delayed notification and local mishandling resulted in massive chaos – gained massive popularity and resonance during the early days of the epidemic, the *CCTV* narration – i.e. Chinese people’s successful war against Covid-19 under the leadership of the CCP – did manage to replace the previous storytelling. In addition to the timely response from the State-media, this transition is also sustained by the pandemic’s development: so far, the Chinese management of the epidemic looks like a success compared to the performance of other major powers in the world. Therefore, to some extent, the unsatisfactory performance from “the West” has contributed to the legitimacy of the CCP.

This study, on the one hand, deepens our understanding of the limitation and agency of market media in times of crisis, challenging the traditional view that the CCP wields total control over information flow. It shows that while the market media has to follow the Party’s overall policy on information management, crises also give them an unprecedented window of opportunity to practise investigative journalism within certain limits. The bottom line is never to challenge the legitimacy of the central government and the socialist system. On the other hand, this research provides insights into the official media’s crisis propaganda. It sheds light on

the responsiveness of the Party-State media control, reflected in the phenomenon we call “double-responsiveness” – in their responsive report that is embedded in the existing discourse, the official media showed their responsive deeds that legitimise the Party-State rule.

It is worth highlighting that in March, the same month when the *CCTV* video-report was released, a “gratitude education” (*gan'en jiaoyu* 感恩教育) campaign was launched in Wuhan. The politics of “gratitude” already featured Hu-Wen decade, yet in Xi’s new era it has been enriched with one significant content: this time people should thank not merely the Party, but also, especially, its general secretary Xi Jinping (Qian, 2020). The *CCTV* video-report, with Xi Jinping as the main protagonist, explained why they should do so. This is how the epidemiological crisis has been turned into a story of victory, in which Xi played a major role. In that being so, this research provides empirical data to argue a “personalistic governance” (Repnikova, 2017, p. 219), featuring the Party-State’s responsiveness in Xi’s “new era”.

Notes

- 1 The Tian’an Men Incident refers to the violent repression, on June 4, 1989, of a pacific movement asking for the transformation of China’s political system.
- 2 The Hu-Wen era covers the decade from 2002 to 2012, during which Hu Jintao was general secretary of the CCP and president of the PRC, and Wen Jiabao was the prime minister.
- 3 Before coding, each episode of the *CCTV* video-report was divided in shots and the audio in the original Chinese language was transcribed in full.
- 4 All the translations from the original Chinese language are by the authors.

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