Introduction to Global Media and China’s Special Issue on COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the lives of people around the globe. As of February 2022, the coronavirus has spread to 193 countries and regions worldwide, with about 378 million known infections and over 5.6 million deaths attributable to the disease (Johns Hopkins University, 2022). While the virus’s impact on health has been devastating, the pandemic impacted nearly every aspect of public life, including nationwide “lockdowns,” dramatic declines in economic output, rampant unemployment, political disputes about masking, and thousands of news stories about the origin and consequences of the pandemic. While there are indications that the number of new infections has finally passed its peak, the social, cultural, and political consequences of the pandemic will be long-lasting.

One noticeable effect of the pandemic on public life has been the growing conflict over masking and vaccination mandates in the United States and Europe. Driven by deep political divisions among politicians and citizens alike, refusals to comply with these mandates have undoubtedly increased the number of deaths attributed to the coronavirus disease. There is also little doubt that former President Trump’s frequent use of the derogatory term “Chinese virus” in his speeches, tweets, and press conferences negatively influenced public perceptions of Asians living in the United States. Trump’s efforts to blame China for the worldwide spread of coronavirus likely encouraged some Americans to not only blame Asians for the pandemic but also physically attack them. Between March 19, 2020 and September 30, 2021, Stop AAPI Hate, a research organization

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that tracks incidents of hate, violence, and discrimination against Asian Americans, reported 10,370 incidents of racist acts aimed at Asian Americans in the United States (Yellow Horse et al., 2021).

One of the more positive effects of the pandemic has been a surge of media research related to the consequences of this unprecedented health crisis. A quick library search indicates that more than 100 academic studies on the COVID-19 pandemic already have been published in major communication journals by early 2022. This is an astonishing output given the severe lockdowns and health-related restrictions scholars faced during the past two years—and it shows how dedicated academics around the world have been to investigate and document the consequences of the pandemic.

For this special section of *Global Media and China*, we sought submissions that examine communication issues that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two articles we selected provide a fascinating snapshot of life in China by focusing on online activism, political satire, and the role of the mass media on prosocial behavior during the pandemic. The first article by Yue Yang investigates online activism in China amidst the onslaught of the lethal virus as discerned in virtual chatters about the predicament of China’s female medical workers. The trigger event was a revelation by a female nurse on national television about her struggle with meeting hygiene needs while taking care of Covid patients—and the dismissive attitude by Wuhan hospital administrators in turning down public donations. What exacerbated Chinese netizens’ resentment was the blatant act of CCTV, China’s sole national television broadcast network, in editing out this interview in its subsequent broadcasts.

Yang’s meticulous dissection of a rich assortment of ensuing user discursive comments and expressive acts in the wake of this episode sheds light on the competing dynamics of China’s online activism through the lens of its evolving brand (or the lack thereof) of hashtag feminism. More importantly, her findings demonstrate the government-sanctioned media’s relentless promotion of “positive energy” through its various relegated mouthpieces under the disguise of your next-door social media users; the massive distributed network of resistance and “microrebellions”; and the participatory culture of “ideotainment” and “politainment” cross-cutting discussions on hot-button issues/topics and grassroots entertainment through online satire, virtual parody, trolling and half-hearted substantive narratives. Yang’s research adds to the growing number of studies (Han, 2018; Tai, 2018) that have shown that dissenting voices and bottom-up resistance still find their multifarious manifestations despite the tight political controls of China’s cyberspace.

In the second article, Jiankun Gong, Hasmah Zanuddin, Weipeng Hou, and Jinghong Xu tackle the role of the Chinese media during the pandemic in cultivating user attention and dependency, which, in turn, affect individual perceptions of self-efficacy and prosocial behavior. The authors argue that there is a place for “constructive journalism” in China that emphasizes solution-based news coverage to engage the audience, especially when a fatal virus is wreaking havoc on public health and the economy. Their analysis of survey data from 905 participants indicates that individual attention to media information and media dependency are both correlated with increase in prosocial behaviors, while self-efficacy exerts a positive mediating effect on these relationships.

Most news media organizations have a natural tendency to focus on the negative aspects and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for people around the world. Constructive journalism, in this context, may provide the much-needed help and guidance for a public that is looking to limit the negative effects of the disease. The findings by Gong and his colleagues raise the question of whether and to what extent the Chinese media’s practice of constructive journalism has relevancy for news media outlets in other socio-political contexts. This is especially pertinent because of the recent surge in studies that explore the possible contributions of constructive journalism to the global community (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Bro, 2019).
The coronavirus is destined to change the global landscape permanently. As distressing and
demoralizing the pandemic has been, it also provides an opportune moment for media and
communication researchers to confront both well-established and emerging lines of inquiries in the
broad context of the virus as it intersects with individuals, society, and mediated communication at
both the national and supranational levels (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). The goal is not just
to understand what has happened but also to prepare better as we move forward. We believe that
cross-national and comparative research in particular will enable theory-driven and practice-
oriented explorations of pandemic-related issues. While our efforts here may be only a droplet
towards that end, we look forward to the big bucket of research to come.

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