One city, many tales: Covid-19, strategies and platforms

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The coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak was prolonged in time, leading to multiple stories by multiple media on multiple platforms. A study of the coverage on China’s engagement with the virus is revealing. First, an examination of international media’s coverage of China’s efforts to stem the virus from spread tells us a lot about the image of China during this period. This is important as China is increasingly taking the leadership in globalisation. Second, an examination of the ways it is covered within China’s Mainland throws light on how Chinese media has transformed since the outbreak of SARS in 2003. After more than 18 years of further political, economic and social changes, especially with social media playing a more active role in China, is China’s media landscape changed, and if so, in what ways?

This second special issue continues to examine and analyse the multiple stories media around the world tell about China’s fight against the deadly virus. In this issue, we move from North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, Central East Europe and Hong Kong in the March issue to countries in Africa and China’s mainland. It first features Madrid-Morales’ audience study in 30 countries in Africa, followed by another two papers on the use of social media in relation to the coverage of Covid-19 and the implications in China’s Mainland.

Starting in the mid-2010s, state- and non-state-owned Chinese media began to increase their presence in many African countries as part of China’s ‘going out strategy’. Xinhua, among other endeavours, offers its content to many African news rooms at no cost – or at a reduced price – and it is distributed through syndication agreements. The greatly increased Sino-African media relations have attracted notable academic interest around the world. However, despite all qualitative evidence in the literature (e.g. Bachelor & Zhang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016), little study has attempted to measure quantitatively the extent of Chinese media’s influence across the continent, particularly vis-à-vis other international news agencies. In addition, most work on the topic has the tendency to associate increased presence with increased influence, without the support of continent-wide empirical evidence of such relationship.

Methodologically rigorous, using such variables as geographic spread, languages, stages of development of domestic media markets and levels of influence from Chinese media organisations, Madrid-Morales’ investigation is the first to quantify the direct and indirect influence of Chinese
media on the news content of 30 African countries. The study demystifies the perception that the increased investment by Chinese media on the continent can be equated to high(er) levels of influence in determining news media narratives on China. As Madrid-Morales’ finding reveals, France’s AFP is the most influential foreign news source when measured in literal or quasi-literal text reuse, followed by Reuters, while Xinhua lags far behind. This gap in influence on transnational media agenda setting function of foreign global media in Africa demonstrates that former colonial powers hold a higher degree of influence than media from China. However, Madrid-Morales’ paper also reveals that China’s strategy in increasing content exchange and syndication agreements between Chinese news agency and partner African organisations is working, as is evidenced by the increased reuse of text from Xinhua in African media which have signed such agreements.

The other two papers, with Chen and Xu’s on comparison between the social media accounts of the party-controlled Xinhua and the more market-oriented The Paper, and Zhang et al.’s study on the user-generated translation (UGT) of content from overseas social media, take us to the media coverage of Covid-19 in China’s Mainland. Together, they shed new light on the changing media landscape in China. Indeed, since the outbreak of SARS more than 18 years ago, the technological, economic and political developments taking place in China have been re-shaping the overall Chinese media landscape. One fundamental difference between the eras of SARS and Covid-19 is the public’s drastically changed news consumption behaviour. Consequently, different from the coverage of SARS in the pre-social media age, social media of all news media, party-controlled or market-oriented, take the lead in covering Covid-19, one prominent feature to engage users in news communication.

Chen and Xu’s paper re-emphasises two tendencies in the Chinese media. First, the shift from conventional media such as print media and TV to social media platforms (e.g. Jinri Toutiao). Second, the convergence between the two different types of media in the way they report on public health crisis.

First, the shift to engage users on the Internet-enabled social media shows the Party’s efforts to extend its operation to online platforms where various stakeholders, with diverse interests, compete for users’ attention. On one hand, the shift is an economic response from the media industry. As of February 2008, 14 years after China was connected to the Internet, the number of Chinese users became the largest in the world. As the user size of online news climbs to nearly 1 billion now, the state media have continued to provide online news. As a way to compete for audiences, Chinese mainstream media have been actively publishing content on popular social media platforms such as Tik Tok and Jinri Toutiao. Of the over 1340 media accounts on Tik Tok, for instance, flagship state media such as the People’s Daily and CCTV (Central China Television) News have set up accounts, attracting over 10 million and 5 million followers, respectively (People.cn, 2019). But the shift is also a political response – ‘we go where the public goes’. The Party has placed great emphasis on the ideological control of the online sphere. However, it also recognises the importance of the Internet to facilitate China to integrate into the global economy. In other words, integration requires not only economic and administrative reform but also absorption of advanced technologies, including the Internet. Therefore, while Chinese leaders have taken care to manage the undesirable political consequences of the free flow of information facilitated by the Internet, they have also treated the Internet as an engine for economic and social growth, and have therefore adopted a proactive policy to develop the Internet. The Party-state thus plays a crucial role in charting the development of the Internet and in conditioning the ways it is used by different actors. Furthermore, it also employs the technology to mobilise social support for its own cause. The outbreak of Covid-19 has actually provided a good opportunity for the Party to promote a
favourable image by responding quickly to people’s concerns via their social media accounts. Being interactive and reciprocal in its nature of communication, the Internet-enabled social media is also used to constrain negative consequences resulting from the traditional one-way communication between the state and society. With continuous upgrades in the digital tools that emphasise interactive and participative modes of communication, the government has been implementing new techniques which enables users not so much as passive recipients as active collaborators who can help re-create and promote pro-government discourses on the social media platforms, thus cascading such content to a larger target audience.

Second, Chen and Xu’s study also shows us that there is convergence in the way Xinhua News Agency and The Paper report on Covid-19 on their social media accounts on Jinri Toutiao (Headline News Today). In their comparative study, Chen and Xu use three paradigms: news framing, story tones and user engagement to locate the differences between Xinhua and The Paper. To capture the differences, Chen and Xu use episodic framing (focusing on individuals, single cases in fighting the pandemic in this case) and thematic framing (highlighting contexts and environments of those cases) for comparison. During the pre-social media era, party-controlled media would focus on thematic frames to highlight contexts and environments of cases, events or issues related to health crises such as in reporting on SARS. Market-oriented media would focus on episodic frames so as to attract more interest via individual and human-interest approaches. Chen and Xu find, as expected, that Xinhua News Agency continued to stay overwhelmingly positive while The Paper was more neutral in reporting the health crisis. In addition, The Paper had a higher level of user engagement. However, they found that both Xinhua News Agency and The Paper used more episodic frames than thematic frames. More surprisingly, Xinhua News Agency was more episodic than The Paper in framing the pandemic, and The Paper used more thematic frames than Xinhua News Agency. In other words, in comparison with news framing of SARS, both Xinhua News Agency and The Paper were more oriented towards their individual and human-interest approaches in their news reporting of Covid-19.

This convergence in reporting the pandemic is the consequence not only of economic reasons but also political reasons. China’s economic reforms and opening up have resulted in a more pluralised and fragmented society. First of all, it is only by catering to the targeted public’s changing and diversified news consumption behaviours can the media organisations get financial reward. As Chen and Xu argue, The Paper is designed to serve the elite segments of the population, who desire more contextual coverage or interpretation of events or issues while Xinhua News Agency is the national leading news agency targeting predominantly the non-elite majority of the population, who would like to read episodically focused news stories. More importantly, I argue, the convergence should also be understood in the context of the Chinese Communist Party managing the whole process of reform and staying ahead of the unwanted consequences of the reform. The convergence in the coverage of the pandemic in terms of framing is therefore part of the efforts of the Chinese conventional media to adapt and integrate with digital technologies, in response both to the market need for content distribution and user engagement as well as government call to use the Internet for economic modernisation. In sum, as Chen and Xu rightly point out, although both party-controlled and market-oriented news media have changed their operations, their fundamental orientations remain. The convergence in the use of framing, episodic or thematic, is to ensure the role of the media is to continue to mobilise the public to support its cause, wherever the public is, offline or online.

Zhang et al.’s paper brings our attention to a different dimension of social media and its potential in opening up new space to ‘citizen media’ practice which creates mediated intercultural communication. The study offers us a valuable glimpse into a newly emerging form of UGT activity. A
group of Bilibili content creators share with fans and viewers what it views or reads about China from international video-sharing platforms by translating, creating and uploading user-generated media content to Bilibili. The ‘community’ thus created features a dynamic and positive interaction between the translators and their fans, leading to the creation of more quality content. The study is important as it shows us the potential of the UGT in breaking down linguistic borders through UGT, enabling fans and viewers to be exposed to different perspectives and to remain open to cross-cultural exchanges, especially at a time of rising concerns over how to live a normal life when the lurking darkness of the virus still keeps parts of the world in lockdown. Their self-created content is made up of voices from the grassroots, a significant component of people-to-people bonds. Their UGT activity not only serves as a living example of the rise of a new type of Internet users known for grassroots creativity but also demonstrates the possibility of OSM platforms developing into a dynamic translation environment with a changed politics and power.

Like the other papers in the March issue, these three papers in the current issue have opened doors for further investigation on image building, perception and reception, and the importance of social media in driving the transformation of media practice. As some of the papers in both issues have pointed out, with the evolution of the pandemic, it will be important to include a longitudinal dimension in studies like these in the future. Future studies should also consider other forms of media content and an even a wider number of nations.

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