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This article was originally published in *Global Media and China*, volume 6, issue 1, in 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436421994003>

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Global Media and China
2021, Vol. 6(1) 8–23
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DOI: 10.1177/2059436421994003
journals.sagepub.com/home/gch

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Abstract

The present study is an analysis of a sample of reports on China's handling of COVID-19 by several major US media with a focus on a controversial op-ed by the *Wall Street Journal*. It is found that instead of covering it objectively as a public health crisis, these media reports tend to adopt the strategy of naming, shaming, blaming, and taming against China. In other words, they seize the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan as an opportunity to serve Trump's "America First" doctrine by a coordinated attempt to destroy the Chinese dream and arresting China's ascendancy. First, the naming/shaming technique is used to tarnish China's image as a virus. The op-ed on the *Wall Street Journal* describes China as "the real sick man of Asia." In addition, a cluster of ferociously negative names are slung onto China to describe the coronavirus as "the Wuhan virus," "the Belt & Road Initiative pandemic," "the China virus," and so on. Second, the blaming technique is applied. On top of such negative name-calling, these media tend to blame the Chinese leadership, the political system, and finally Chinese food culture for eating pangolins. Finally, the taming technique is used to constrain, isolate, or quarantine China. One goal behind such a China threat strategy is to fan American or foreign businesses to move (back) to the United States out of China. Another goal is to create the public opinion environment that would be conducive to some American groups' litigations against China. It is concluded that American mainstream media while quarreling with the Trump administration for domestic affairs seem to be colluding with the conservative intellectual base in the United States in supporting Trump's strategy to knock down and divide China.

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Keywords

China's national image, COVID-19, rhetorical technique, US media

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic from Wuhan, China, in 2020 has been exerting a huge impact on public health, politics, economics, and social development across the globe. The current world order has also been greatly challenged, especially among the United States as the largest developed country and China as the largest developing country. The contentious and deteriorating relationship between China and the United States has triggered various types of conflicts, including trade disputes; the closure of regional diplomatic consulates such as Chinese Consulate in Houston, Texas, and US Consulate in Chengdu, China; the mutual expulsion of foreign correspondents; the crackdown of Chinese companies in the United States; and so on. According to the data released in the first half year of 2020 by Pew Research Center, it shows that two thirds of Americans hold an unfavorable attitude toward China, which reaches the highest peak of negative rating of Chinese people and the government leaders by Americans since 2005. Major factors that influence American attitudes toward China include trade deficit between China and the United States, domestic job losses, China's human rights issues, environmental pollution, and so on. Compared with Democrats and Democratic leaning people with 72% who dislike China, this kind of negative attitude toward China is more prominent in Republicans with a rate 10% higher. Moreover, an increasing number of Americans, about nine in 10, view China's power and rise as a threat to the United States, especially among young people, compared with 15 years ago. Furthermore, nearly 70% Americans who are older than 50 years view China as a major threat, with their worries focusing upon China's cybersecurity, global environmental impact, and other economic factors. About 91% hold the point of view that the United States should be the world's leading power (Devlin et al., 2020). Besides the United States, many other countries, including Australia, Canada, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Germany, all view China in a negative light as they think China has handled COVID-19 poorly. Moreover, Asian American Studies Professor Russel Jeung from San Francisco State University found in a study that the number of American news reports about racial discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic period has increased by 50% between February 7 and March 9, 2020 (University Development, 2020). Breaking it down into specific categories, he found that "community resistance to racism" accounts for 27%, "stereotyping" accounts for 16%, "discrimination against Asian American communities" accounts for 23%, and "politician statements and policies" take up 14% (Oppenheim, 2020). Stop AAPI Hate Center and an anti-racism advertisement campaign have been launched to allow people to report racial harassment and discrimination attacks both online on social media and offline.

During the era of uncertainty and initial panic caused by the COVID-19 flu, news agencies have the responsibility to deliver the truth behind the story to people. However, Trump administration wants to start a "cold war" with China so as to achieve his mantra of "America First." His "cold war" against China has been greatly facilitated by the outbreak of COVID-19. Based on the data discussed above, we have enough evidence to prove that American news media have been playing a significant role in promoting Trump government's ideology and political strategy. Therefore, an analysis of their news frames using discourse analysis is due. Allport and Postman (1947) argue that a rumor can grow and spread rapidly and widely when there is lack of news delivered by professional groups. When some social crises abruptly happen, people usually become quite nervous

without obtaining enough details of news they need, and they would easily believe in unverified information from unofficial sources, which may take the form of misinformation or disinformation. Therefore, clear, transparent, and timely news reports by trustworthy news organizations can maintain social order and stability, appease people's worries and anxiety, and play a helpful function in discounting or getting rid of widespread rumors and fake news.

However, news media from the United States in the era of the Trump administration such as the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post* are found to consistently hold explicitly or implicitly Trump's "America First" doctrine in their news coverage on COVID-19 with reference to China. Styling themselves as objective and neutral observers of the society and world affairs, they have now demonstrated a clear political inclination and used rhetorical tools such as the techniques of naming, shaming, blaming, and taming in their coverage of China. The strong agenda-setting effect of the US media may be deepening the preexisting bias toward China already held by many Americans and international readers. It seems that US mainstream media's news coverage of China's fight against coronavirus and China's global assistance in the world's fight against the virus has diverted people's attention from combating humanity's common enemy COVID-19 to instigating racism and nationalism in the United States against China and targeting China rather than the pandemic as the real enemy. In this article, we plan to answer the following research question: How have the American mainstream media reported on China with reference to COVID-19? More specifically, how have the US mainstream media covered Trump's "China virus" or "kung flu"? To accomplish our goal, we will analyze, with a focus on the controversial op-ed published by the *WSJ* on February 3, 2020, how several US mainstream media have reported on China's combat against COVID-19 both at home and abroad.

Review of literature

Regarding news framing and content analysis of public health crises covered by newspapers, scholars have already done relatively abundant research. In the study done on the media coverage of the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) by the *Associated Press* and the *Xinhua News Agency* in 2003, four frame dimensions are found to embed themselves in the news coverage. They include attribution of responsibility from Chinese government and concerned authorities, economic and financial consequences of SARS, human interest of involving an emotional angle or adding personal feelings, and severity frame perceiving SARS pandemic's seriousness, threat, and its magnitude (Beaudoin, 2007). News framing of human interest and attribution of responsibility was more obvious in the *Associate Press's* coverage, whereas the severity frame was used more by *Xinhua News Agency*. Content analysis of news coverage has also been applied in dissecting three Chinese news magazines, that is, *Beijing Review*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. It is found that Chinese government's crisis management strategies are determined by external pressure and internal government intervention (Meng & Berger, 2008). Specifically, personnel of different administrative levels ranging from the local to the international have involved to effectively control the crisis. Besides, studies on media coverage of three health issues, including mad cow disease, West Nile virus, and avian flu, reveal that coverage of health crises, using case studies, demonstrates a significant correlation between news framing and the nature of the epidemic diseases as well as different phases of issue development cycles across different diseases (Shih et al., 2008). If the epidemic disease demonstrates stronger political nature, then its relevant news coverage tends to have more conflict frames. Health crises like HIV/AIDs have been framed differently by the *Associate Press* with a clear anti-government frame and *Xinhua News Agency* with a pro-government frame (Wu, 2006). It

is pointed out that there are three typical frames employed by the *Associate Press* such as “the dishonesty/oppression frame, the human rights abuser frame, and the incompetence frame,” whereas there are also three major frames adopted by *Xinhua News Agency* such as “the defense frame, the progress frame, and the ambivalence/ambiguity frame.”

The outbreak of coronavirus pandemic occurred in Wuhan, China, in December, 2019. Therefore, information sources released by Chinese government was initially treated as important sources that people around the globe paid attention to. Some Western scholars find that English news reports released by media of authoritarian countries, including China, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, are good at producing COVID-19-related content on social media for wide distribution among a larger global audience. The effect on the audience brought about by these state-led English news agencies is usually high. However, such health news is usually regarded as biased and misleading as it is politicized by means of criticizing the corrupt democratic system, praising its own leadership, and making use of conspiracy theories (Bright et al., 2020). It is true that the tension between China and the United States has been exacerbated by a pandemic-related information deficit due to the fact that most Americans are unfamiliar with Chinese media and culture while many Chinese have a good knowledge of the US media (Moser, 2020). The information asymmetry can be reflected in several aspects such as China’s internet blocks and firewalls, a higher number of Chinese students studying in the United States than American students in China, and different media control systems, further leading to asymmetry in the quality of political media discourse between the United States and China.

Facing the arrival of COVID-19 and a shocking number of infections and deaths, the US government and its health care system lag behind in responses and are ill prepared. Carter et al. (2017) find that racial and ethnic discrimination have an adverse effect on people of color’s mental and physical health, especially the psychological health. Racial discrimination and ethnic disparities have also been identified by scholars claiming that ethnic groups in the United States such as Blacks tend to have a higher rate of getting infected or even dying from coronavirus, illustrating devastating effects brought about by the disease on communities of color (Laurencin & McClinton, 2020). Thus, they call for a specially established body “National Commission on COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities” to address the issue of health disparities among different racial groups in the United States. The Chinese group in particular has been targeted by many Western media with news titles such as “China is the real sick man of Asia” and they describe COVID-19 as “Chinese virus pandemonium,” which exacerbates intense racial discrimination and tars China’s national image (Wen et al., 2020). Social media has already become an important platform for people to obtain news during the pandemic era. At the early stage of the COVID-19, the speed at which health communication is distributed on social media falls behind the outbreak and development of the COVID-19. Some false and misleading virus-related content has been categorized by scholars into four types, that is, unreliable misinformation, conspiracy/ scientifically questionable news, clickbait, and political and biased news. Together, they exert a deep and long impact on public health, national elections, and intervention policies (Sharma et al., 2020). Misinformation has also been found on Facebook’s advertising platform with a clear demographic target regarding news and political advertisements (Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020). In comparison with news, political advertisements related to coronavirus and public health topics target an older generation who may be easily misled by misinformation or disinformation. A relevant study about misinformation and news trustworthiness conducted in democratic countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Spain, Germany, and South Korea, finds that both the less educated people and young people are much more likely to rely on social media and messaging applications to obtain news, and political orientation plays a significant role in trusting news. Furthermore,

scholars who have studied information transmission networks on twitter in South Korea reveal that most news do not have a medical frame, and news articles containing COVID-19-related medical information have stronger spillover effect in comparison with those without medical frames (Park et al., 2020). It should also be noted that public health officials play a more important role that cannot be replaced by social media networks during the pandemic era.

In the United States, people who are left-libertarians tend to have more trust in independent news organizations than the government while right-conservatives trust the White House much more (Nielsen et al., 2020). Compared with other countries, Americans tend to have lower trust of government and there is a lot of misinformation and false news following a bottom-up pattern. Communication intensity and risk perception brought about by unpredictable emergence and spread of misinformation have challenged the classical crisis lifecycle, including four stages of “prodromal, acute, chronic and resolution” (Yu et al., 2020). Thus, the pandemic has been closely interacting with infodemic challenges (Jia, 2020; Yu et al., 2020).

In this article, we try to explore the techniques of naming and shaming, blaming, and taming applied in the sampled news articles. The naming and shaming technique has been analyzed in many fields, including public opinion content analysis, legal studies, and policy studies. In policy studies, Pawson (2002) points out that “naming and shaming” strategy used in policy intervention is the same as “‘public disclosure’ to overcome recalcitrant behavior,” which is positively contagious (p. 212). When studying government killing, naming, and shaming, DeMeritt (2012) finds that shaming threatens leaders and perpetrators with legal and economic punishment and threatens leaders’ monopoly of power. In public opinion studies, scholars who study shaming on twitter classify shaming tweets into six categories, including “abusive, comparison, passing judgment, religious/ethnic, sarcasm/joke, and whataboutery” (Basak et al., 2019, p. 208). Moreover, Snyder (2020) has identified the emotional result of naming and shaming used in human rights activism, including anger, hatred, humiliation, social withdrawal, resistance, contempt, and so on. Blaming, shaming, and taming are also emotionally negative attacks embedded in news reports. They deserve much in-depth scrutiny in public health crisis studies as the public generally experience a high fluctuation in the initial phase of this kind of crisis. However, we barely see any relevant study focusing upon this situation. The application of blaming in discourse analysis reveals that journalists doing “factual” news reports need to be aware of metaphors indicating certain power hierarchies with a supportive tone (Roelofs, 2014). The technique of blaming has also been used in news framing analysis, especially the responsibility regarding social problems (Holton et al., 2012). Wyatt (2012) points out that the narrative of blaming is mainly about the rise of problems and tragedies, and he proposes a model of blame in journalism studies, including the context for blame, the philosophy of blame, the need for blame, the force of blame, and the tone of blame. We define taming here as a discursive effort to abusively constrain and shape the behavior of the counterpart usually against the counterpart’s wishes, preferences, and interest.

The studies reviewed above constitute a solid basis of knowledge for the present study to build on. This body of research seems to have reached the following consensus: First, the statement that news and news media as truth-holders free of biases and possessed by objectivity is already debunked as a myth. Second, framing is inherent in news coverage. Third, the coverage of COVID-19 by Western media in general and the American mainstream media in particular is one of the most biased and politicized cases of news coverage in recent memory. However, as news reporting on COVID-19 is a new and still ongoing journalistic practice of growing proportions, a more updated, more systematically documented and analyzed textual or rhetorical study of such a politicized news coverage in light of an ideological and strategic perspective is highly warranted to both

uncover the working mechanism of framing and make the argument for media reform. Given the fact that no rhetorical studies regarding US media coverage of COVID-19 with reference to China have been found, this study aims to fill this research gap.

Method

In this study, we collect data from three US mainstream news media such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *WSJ*, and one US magazine *Foreign Policy*. We choose these major US media to analyze news reports relevant with the COVID-19 pandemic for two reasons. On one hand, these news media enjoy world-renowned reputation and have a large amount of circulation both inside and outside of the United States. On the other hand, China imposed restrictions upon journalists working for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *WSJ* in March 2020. These American journalists were requested by China to return their media passes with an expiration date by the end of 2020 within 10 days as a punishment for their negative coverage of China with reference to COVID-19. These reporters are also banned from working in Hong Kong and Macau. We choose *Foreign Policy* in our analysis as this magazine is one of the mainstream American magazines on global affairs. Regarding their political leaning based on media bias and fact check website, both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have a moderate liberal left-center bias with arguably a high factual reporting style, whereas the *WSJ* has a conservative right-center bias with arguably a mostly factual reporting style. In contrast, *Foreign Policy* is the least biased and has a high factual reporting (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2020). Regarding the timeframe we set in this research, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic started from December 2019 and the initial news reports were consecutively released from January 2020. In July 2020, *Xinhua News Agency* reported that the emergency response in Beijing had adjusted from Level 2 to Level 3, declaring that COVID-19 pandemic had been almost under control in China.

We apply the four rhetorical techniques, namely, naming, shaming, taming, and blaming, as an integrated framework in our news analysis because they constitute a coherent logical sequence fitting and proper for the nature of the body of discourse under inquiry. First of all, naming originates from Confucianism. On one hand, Confucianism advocates for “Ming(naming)zheng Yanshun” (名正言顺) in conducting public affairs (Confucius, 1979). The concept of “Mingzheng Yanshun” means that one gets formal power from proper naming given to him or her to govern. Giving nicknames to others, however, is a form of improper naming. It is a form of abuse of power, especially under the Trump government, and political leaders use nicknaming as a political rhetoric from the ancient time to the modern days (Ross & Rivers, 2020). This is unfortunately widely practiced by the Trump administration and the mainstream US media especially toward China. For example, President Trump calls the coronavirus as the “China Virus” and Joe Biden as “sleepy Joe” and supports the *WSJ*'s op-ed demonizing China as “the real sick man of Asia.” The rhetorical technique of shaming is embedded in such improper and degrading naming. Calling names or nicknames, attempting to twist reality and facts, is a form of unethical communication as it is abusive and degrading. Naming and shaming naturally leads to blaming as the next logical step especially when such naming/shaming is not effectively refuted. This is especially true during the COVID-19 period when Trump government constantly blamed China for not learning a good lesson from the outbreak of SARS pandemic in 2002 and for lack of transparency about the pandemic without the conclusive scientific evidence in the first place. Their motive is quite simple: to abusively tame China and eventually contain China's rise on the global stage. So certain mainstream US media,

orchestrating with and echoing the Trump administration, applies these techniques to China as their agenda-setting tools. The integrated framework of analysis is summarized based on our own observations and understanding, which does not exist in current literature and can be regarded as an innovation of this study.

Analysis

In the following section, we would like to provide a detailed analysis of news framing about COVID-19 with reference to China reported by several US mainstream newspapers plus a magazine since the start of the outbreak on December 31, 2019. We argue that these media, all with a global outlook, are representative of mainstream American media. The *New York Times* is popular and known as a predominantly liberal medium with a sentiment close to that of the Democratic Party, whereas the *Washington Post* and *Foreign Policy* which was first founded by famed Harvard professor Samuel Huntington in 1970 and has been recently acquired by the *Washington Post* tend to be conservative in close proximity to the sentiment of the GOP. The *WSJ*, as a predominantly pro-business-finance journal, privileges the concerns of both middle-income and high-income consumers and finds itself welcomed by both the elites of the Democratic Party and the GOP and beyond.

Western journalism, American journalism in particular, is traditionally described as “watchdog journalism” serving as a type of investigative journalism with an important function to do fact-checking, verify the news’ validity, and keep a distance from people in power. The role of watchdog journalism plays a significant role in conducting opinion control regarding political corruption and wrongdoings of government officials. Mellado (2015) has identified three dimensions of operationalization, that is, intensity of scrutiny, journalistic voice as a third party, and the source of news event in watchdog journalism. Therefore, watchdog journalism can work well in well-developed democracies. Audience orientation, media political leaning, and news beats are all factors that could impact the role of a watchdog. However, some scholars point out that there are several contradictions regarding the watchdog theory, including ideological conflicts involving class nature, cultural imperialism, and factionalism; system ownership conflicts involving commercialization and monopolization; epistemological contradiction involving cognitive limitation and discourse traps; and methodological contradiction involving polarized reporting and a preset setting (Lu & Hu, 2020). After all, Western watchdog journalism serves for capital and power and demonstrates a strong ideological standing.

Our analysis of a sample of the news reports by the abovementioned American mainstream media confirms the above conclusion to be true. Our analysis reveals that most of their news coverage of China’s combat against COVID-19 has used biased and negative tone and adopted, to varying degrees and in various instances, the following rhetorical strategies: naming, shaming, blaming, and taming. Such rhetorical strategies constitute a host of instruments of Trump’s overall smear campaign against China.

The application of naming and shaming

First, the techniques of naming and shaming have been widely applied to tarnish China’s image as the virus in the news reports by these media. Naming, in this situation, is a process of designating or ascribing someone as something negative, inferior, or undesirable. Untruthful, unfair, and unjust judgments and attitudes such as stereotypes and biases are embedded in such naming acts. Such

naming results in creating the mental discord, lowering the self-esteem, and even depression of the target audience. As a further result, if it lasts long and is in high frequency, the target audience, without tools to fight back and correct it, may very well feel ashamed, discriminated against, and feel self-hating. Therefore, we argue that negative naming goes hand in hand with shaming. Indeed, part of the purpose of such negative naming is to cause the target audience to feel ashamed to say the least. The idea that negative naming results in shaming is especially true in Confucianism-oriented cultures such as Chinese culture that values face as a form of unique social capital in the social contexts (Jia, 2001). The naming–shaming technique, often used in the cultures of competition and confrontation as a tool for social control, is rarely used explicitly in a collectivist culture such as China. When it is indeed used, it would cause the target audience to lose face (*diulian*) and even lose personhood (*diuren*) in both the moral and social dimensions. It would deprive the target audience of their courage to live a meaningful public life or deprive them of their dignity to live a meaningful life any longer. Such unjust and unfair naming would result in the pains of “slings and arrows” in the heart and mind of the Chinese who are more accustomed to living a conflict-preventive and harmony-oriented life than a conflict-prone and antagonist one.

Trump had started his smear campaign against China long before coronavirus broke out. On his campaign trail for the 2016 presidential election, Candidate Trump would call China names with which most mainstream media in the United States did not resonate often, except populist media such as *Breitbart News* and extreme right-wing media such as *Fox News*. However, since the release of National Security Report by Trump’s White House on December 17, 2017, which branded China as “a revisionist power” and as “a strategic rival or competitor” for the United States, more and more American mainstream media have begun to more explicitly and more frequently dance in tune with the Trump administration or Trumpism. A collusion seems to have been built around the China-centered smear campaign among mainstream media, conservative think tank opinion leaders, and a faction of Trump administration officials, especially around the time when China was fully occupying itself in an all-out fight against the coronavirus with few cases reported in the United States.

It is on February 3, 2020, when a highly controversial op-ed titled “China is the real sick man of Asia” was published on its “Global View” column by the *WSJ*. It was written by Walter Russel Mead, a *WSJ* Global View columnist who also serves as the Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship at Hudson Institute. The Hudson Institute is known as a right-wing think tank in Washington, DC, which President Trump relies on heavily in policy making. As one can tell, the alliance among the think tank, the media platform, and the Trump White House had been already in place to start escalating a smear campaign against China when the time was ripe. It was most probably conceptualized by right-wing opinion leaders such as Mead whose job is to make the “right” judgment of the situation and make the timely move in shaping the nature and direction of the public opinion about China with regard to coronavirus in consistency with Trump’s China policy spelt out in his National Security Strategy. Therefore, the penning and publication of this notorious op-ed is no accident. The formulation of the title of this op-ed which is glaringly discriminatory against China is also not out of innocence and naivety. It is a perfect example of the use of the technique of naming and shaming. Inserted in this naming act is an arbitrary and violent framing and designation of China as an unhealthy and sickly body politic, as a people, and as a civilization prone to diseases and on the brink of death. It intends to erase all the accomplishments of modernization achieved and all the contributions to the world made by generations of generations of Chinese since the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Particularly, such achievements and contributions have been

made by Chinese people under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the founding of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and since the Economic Reform and Open-Door Policy in 1978. This op-ed with its title not only drew heated protests from Chinese government and people of Asian descent in North America and around the world but also the world community, including many Americans. The demand for the *WSJ* to apologize and to remove the op-ed or change its title met with a refusal from the *WSJ*. Mead, the columnist who wrote the op-ed, pretending that he had not known that the *WSJ* Opinion Editorial Board had assigned the obnoxious title to his op-ed, simply shrugged off and recused himself of this opinion thunderstorm which he himself must have masterminded. He must have been self-content watching in his office while sipping a cup of coffee that this firestorm he had successfully ignited using the platform of the *WSJ* was growing to global proportions. Trying to protect Mead as the eye of the storm, the Editorial Board of the *WSJ* opinions section acted as the center of this firestorm.

Having successfully made this branding of China as “the real sick man of Asia” widely known through provocative and controversial means which is a typical example of Trump's communication strategies, Mead and the *WSJ* successfully set the stage on which Trump daringly picked it up and elevated this smear campaign against China onto the podium of the White House. He began to use “China virus,” “Wuhan virus,” and later “kung flu” to continue the naming/shaming technique in his White House press conferences covered by the media, among others. The intention was obvious. His smear campaign is to reinforce the biased ascription of China as “the real sick man of Asia” initially provided by Mead whose job is to prescribe this biased and discriminatory frame for Trump and the like to hammer and nail down on China. They were hoping that China and Asians around the world would not be able to shed and shake off this tarnished image so that White supremacy would prevail both in the United States and around the world and the United States would continue to prevail as the hegemon in the world. In their calculation, if or when the rest of the world buy into their smearing of China as the real sick man in Asia, consequentially foreign investment and foreign companies would be withdrawn out of China, and international exchanges would be cut off with China. The title of the op-ed sounds like a subtle call to the world to isolate China or put China into quarantine so that China would no longer be a strategic competitor for the United States and the realization of Trump's “America First” doctrine would be guaranteed.

When the controversy erupted about the title of the op-ed, perhaps very few people thought about such grave implications. Today, from Trump's moves to collapse Huawei, to kick Tiktok and WeChat out of the United States and around the world, to his moves to challenge China's sovereignty in a variety of ways such as signing the bills on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, the United States' military threats to China on South China Sea and so on and so forth, one can understand why such a title was significant in Trump's smear campaign against China. The op-ed illustrates that naming/shaming constitutes a sharp weapon of Trump's war against China. It further explains why the *WSJ* and Mead refuse to bow down to the protests and demands against the smear. Finally, it explains why China and Chinese around the world have been feeling hurt and harmed in deep anguish. This labeling/naming/shaming act by Mead has created a new epistemological basis of oppression for media, government officials such as Trump, and people to act upon. As a consequence of such a smear battle coordinated and orchestrated by the conservative intellectual force represented by Mead, the media force represented by the *WSJ*, and the political force represented by Trump against China and Chinese, hundreds of thousands of cases of discrimination against people of Asian descent reportedly occurred in the United States and beyond (Travernise & Oppel, 2020). This may explain why some people now call Trump's China strategy as Chinese Exclusion Act 2.0.

While Mead masterminded the smear campaign stunt and the *WSJ* promoted it, it is President Donald J. Trump who used “Chinese virus” that triggered the American society’s anti-Asian sentiment. When influential politicians label a group of people in a racist term, it acts like a call for their constituents to take up racist action against the members of the target group. According to an NBC news report, the racist image of China in the United States has been lasting for hundreds of years that Chinese people are noncivilized and unsanitary, and they live in dirty and crowded Chinatown which is full of contagion and disease (Kandil, 2020). The news report released by NBC goes that there are “hundreds of racist and xenophobic incidents” per week and Chinese Americans are even discriminated by Korean Americans and face difficult challenges in their daily life as a consequence of President Trump’s use of the term. *Foreign Policy* has directly titled coronavirus as “SARS-AGAIN” and “Chinese Virus” due to China’s repetition of the same misbehaviors (Babones, 2020). The report states, “Viruses may be forces of nature, but the coronavirus epidemic clearly seems to have been China-made.” On social media such as twitter, it is found that there are many rumors and racist posts targeting China and other Asian people, naming coronavirus as “Kung flu,” “Chinese virus,” and “communist virus” (Yan, 2020) following Trump’s initial use of the term. According to a news report done by the *New York Times*, when asked about his opinion upon naming the virus as “Chinese virus,” President Trump thought he did not allegedly discriminate Chinese people but only stated a fact that “the illness was first detected in China” (Rogers et al., 2020). To his constituents, Trump’s use of the naming technique reflected his opinion of the coronavirus as a China threat. Moreover, Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State, publicly named the virus as “Wuhan virus” in a press briefing. The war against the coronavirus is also named by *Foreign Policy* as “people’s war” as the reporter believes that maintaining internal social stability is CCP’s top priority to control any potential social chaos (Fu, 2020). Such chaos includes cultural, mental, and societal hazards, and organized collective action is under strict scrutiny by the government.

Apart from the controversial op-ed released by the *WSJ*, there are other news articles about President Trump’s calling COVID-19 as “kung-flu” published by *Forbes* magazine, *The Economic Times*, *BBC News*, the *Hindustan Times*, and so on. It should be noted that most news reports keep an objective and neutral tone saying that Trump used this term to only emphasize the virus had originated in China. Besides, many news media show sympathy and concern for Asian Americans facing racism and used various expert opinions regarding Trump’s “China virus” and “kung flu.” Although the framing effect of using “China virus” and “kung flu” by news media might have an impact upon audiences’ attitudes toward China, a poll finds that 66% Americans think the use of “China virus” is inappropriate (*The Hill*, 2020). Therefore, as we can see, the application of the techniques of naming and shaming by news media such as the *WSJ* turns into the game of blaming the Chinese political system with a Trumpian political agenda behind it.

The application of blaming

Second, news reports by the sampled media have often employed the blaming technique. Blaming typically takes the form of other-directed wrongful and outright fingering-pointing at the target audience without any intention to reflect upon one’s own actions and to take one’s own responsibility. It is a tool to scapegoat an outsider, in this case, China, and shift the responsibility from the Trump administration to China for his poor management of coronavirus resulting in more than 19.7 million cases of patients and 3,41,000 deaths in the United States by December 30, 2020, according to the *New York Times*. The real purpose of such blaming is Trump has been shifting the blame away from him to China to win his eventual unsuccessful bid for the second-term presidency.

Foreign Policy blamed Chinese government for not learning a good lesson from the SARS epidemic for two major reasons (Babones, 2020). One is the insufficient regulation and control of potential danger and health risks posed by live animal markets; the other is suppressing epidemic information by Chinese government as a state secret, which seriously delayed the timely and necessary action and consequently led to an unstoppable tragedy. Besides, the CCP has also been blamed to use a propaganda narrative to boast its political system's superiority, that is, the China model under totalitarian state capitalism during the coronavirus pandemic era is more effective than a laissez faire society such as the United States. As an authoritarian regime described by *Foreign Policy*, China locked people in their homes, conducted city lockdown, and used heavy-handed police to arrest people who complained about the central government's policy to ensure both health safety and social stability. The *New York Times* even published a news report consisting of a conspiracy theory and a title of "Chinese Agents Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in US" (Wong et al., 2020). Although journalists stated the message that "The Trump administration was about to lock down the entire country" was a piece of fake news clarified by the White House's National Security Council, they still use such an inflammatory title to attract readers' eyeball.

The reporting style of blaming also comes with rising skepticism. The *Washington Post* published an article saying that "Leaked contents of the cable sparked unproven speculation from senior US officials beginning in April that the outbreak occurred as a result of an accident at the Wuhan Institute of Virology" (Hudson & Jones, 2020). Although President Trump said he was highly confident that the virus had leaked out from a Chinese lab, he still could not provide any evidence to the public. Therefore, this kind of news would verify nothing but increase the public's anxiety and hatred toward China and therefore regarded Chinese people as their enemy. The *WSJ* also revealed that one of the most plausible explanations for Chinese Government to cover up the epidemic is Wuhan lab's accidental leak that should require an outside inspection. Furthermore, the *Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria blamed about China's post-coronavirus foreign policy as "China's strategic blunders" regarding China's territorial dispute and incursion into India, China's cyberattacks against Australia, China's confrontational and aggressive style of Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, and increasing tensions with other neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Japan, and Philippines (Zakaria, 2020).

Foreign Policy published many pieces of opinion and articles directly blaming China with a history of mishandling epidemic outbreaks like SARS in 2003 such as "China is avoiding blame by trolling the world" by censoring and detaining brave doctors (Hamid, 2020); China deceived the World Health Organization by delivering the message "The possibility of limited human-to-human transmission cannot be excluded, but the risk of sustained transmission is low" (Gilsinan, 2020); and Chinese media and diplomats legitimized conspiracy theories on social media by claiming that the United States is the place where the virus originated (DiResta, 2020). *Foreign Policy* also invited columnists of the Chinese descent with a liberal orientation to write an analysis. Tracy Wen Liu, an author, reporter, and translator, wrote a news report on her personal experience of how the authoritarian regime's censorship works to suppress domestic panic and potential stability. Chinese Government's censorship strategies include closing large numbers of Weibo accounts that supported medical staff and helped COVID-19 victims, threatening people who personally posted pictures or delivered what had happened on a daily basis in the pandemic epicenter without obtaining consent from the government, and deleting brave reports done by *Caixin*, the *Paper*, *Renwu*, and *Fangfang's Wuhan Diary* (T. W. Liu, 2020). Another article published by *Foreign Policy* publicly questions China's data authenticity by analyzing and discussing a leaked Chinese virus database that covers

more than 230 cities with 640,000 people infected (Fish & Sinclair, 2020). It is further reported that this database containing rich information of coronavirus deaths and cases has been leaked by the National University of Defense Technology in China. Although we do not clearly know how these data were collected, the report insinuates that this dataset is more trustworthy than the official one released by Chinese Government due to its propagandistic and politicized nature.

The application of taming

While we find that the technique of taming is not used explicitly and directly against China by the sampled US media, the US media's naming, shaming, and blaming on China with reference to COVID-19 have created the public opinion environment that offered the US government incentives to tame China mostly in its efforts to decouple China from the United States in technology, culture and education, and so on. For example, President Trump used the technique of taming against China's high-tech companies such as Huawei, Tik Tok, and Tencent. The US military's drills near and drones' daily flight over South China Sea, challenging China's territorial integrity, the US Congress' 366 bills against China with the biggest increase during our sampled timeframe, and so on all illustrate the consistent and incessant use of the containment strategy to coerce China into an abandonment of China's development strategy and force China into its subjugation to the United States. *Foreign Policy* reported that "the use of Huawei equipment really does pose a security risk for fifth-generation (5G) networks, and China really has ignored its international treaty obligations in the South China Sea" (Babones, 2020). Nine Chinese media entities such as *China Central Television*, *China Global Television Network*, the *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, the *Global Times*, *China Daily Distribution Corporation*, *China News Services*, *China Radio International*, and *Hai Tian Development USA* are listed by US Department of State (2020) as foreign government missions that are directly controlled by Chinese Government. Chinese Government expelled US correspondents located in China working for the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *WSJ* in retaliation. However, this kind of retaliation is exerting adverse effect on China itself because the lack of US journalists in person in China tend to force US media to produce more biased news reports in the Trump era toward China without enough journalists' firsthand gathering of news from China. The current China-US relationship has been worsening in many aspects. The mutual crack-down upon news agencies and journalists of both countries has been undermining the basic venues of people-to-people communication. Such mutually harmful decoupling between the United States and China is, to quite an extent, attributable to the negative media reports on China using techniques of naming/shaming and blaming exemplified by the *WSJ* op-ed.

The fourth branch of government or the fourth estate?

Is the American media still the fourth estate or is it becoming the fourth branch of government? The above analysis of the media reports with a focus on the *WSJ* op-ed offers a clear answer to the question: The American media is becoming more of the fourth branch of government and less of the fourth estate under the Trump administration particularly with regard to foreign affairs such as issues about China. The role of the American media has been found to consistently and irrevocably support the Trump doctrine despite their barking and bickering against and over Trump. To serve Trump's National Security Strategy, the US media has gone as mad and desperate as Trump has and as madness can be. The American media, lacking the courage to be genuinely independent, self-critical, and critical of the government, is in a fundamental ethical and professional crisis.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed news reports on China's COVID-19 done by several US mainstream news media, including the *New York Times*, the *WSJ*, the *Washington Post*, and *Foreign Policy*. We find that there are four main rhetorical techniques applied by these media agencies, that is, naming, shaming, blaming, and taming, based on our own observations and understanding. We use this analytical framework consisting of these four techniques to conduct the news analysis because we find it most capable of generating insights about the data at hand, revealing the mechanism of this body of discourse, and uncovering the ulterior motives of these media. We hold that these findings enrich our understanding of media framing in that media framing is not only inherent, but also can be strategically and ideologically deployed and exaggerated to achieve a given political goal. However, we are also aware of our research limitations. Our study does not cover ordinary citizens' reactions on social media, and the number of media we focus on is also limited. Thus, future directions along this line of research could involve sentiment analysis by using social network analysis on major media platforms, and the criteria to select media agencies can take political spectrum into consideration, and further quantitative content analysis could be applied in relative study.

We also find the emergence of the following patterns of use of the techniques based on the above analysis: While shaming is almost always implicated in each documented instance of naming, blaming and taming are found to be either both implicated in naming or occur independently. Together, they constitute a host of rhetorical ropes to put the target audience into a physical–mental chain for exploitation and oppression. These acts are both highly unethical and blatantly illegal. They must be protested, litigated against, and stopped. While we applaud for Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement taking place in the United States and beyond, the exclusion of the issues of discrimination and oppression against China and people of Asian origin in the form of Chinese Exclusion Act 2.0 in the BLM movement and in the United States media coverage of the BLM movement reveals a major limitation and flaw of the BLM movement and the selective blindness of the media. The silence of these sampled American mainstream media on Tennessee senator Marsha Blackburn's most recent tirade against Chinese nation and civilization as having a 5000 years' history of "cheating and stealing" can only reveal their complicity with the anti-China forces of the United States in another form. The silence of the US Congress, the American society, and the global public opinion arena, and particularly the US media on Trump's push for Chinese Exclusion Act 2.0 and Cold War 2.0 with China constitutes a form of complicity that may backfire or backbite. It is high time that the American media became a real watchdog with an American soul again regardless of types of issues, be they domestic or global.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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