A Study of Covid-19 Coverage in the Western Mainstream Media from the Perspective of Agenda Setting

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Abstract. Apart from changes in lifestyle, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) alters people's values or way of thinking partly because people spend more time browsing the Internet during quarantine. Trendy topics are always related to COVID-19, such as newly updated morality and fatality rate, measures of avoiding COVID-19, and the impact of the pandemic on the global economics and political scene. Different news editors tend to emphasize different detail of the same piece of information, thus switching audiences' attention, leading to diversity of thinking on the same information. By applying the agenda-setting theory as a theoretical model and case analysis as methodology, the paper further explores how media handle COVID-19-related news to shape public opinion in the context of Western public opinion. Ultimately, this study found that news coverage in the Western mainstream media exhibits the following characteristics: control of the direction of news coverage, guidance of public opinion but susceptibility to public opinion, homogeneity of content and the ability to enhance mass cohesion.

Keywords: Agenda setting theory; Covid-19; western mainstream social media; public opinion.

1. Introduction

Media is a way of communication that reach and influence other people. With rapid digitalization, people's source of news switched from traditional newspaper, radio and to television and social media that enables people to receive reports more quickly and comprehensively. Contemporary western social media are applications and website that support the reception of news information and online communication such as Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. People who have accounts of these social media enlarge their social circle, having the access to see and interact with their friends, celebrities and participate in online discussion around a trendy topic. The advent of these applications makes media more wide spreading by giving every user a platform to share their lifestyle and interest, decreasing the barrier of media and increasing the quantity of we-media user. In addition, many well-known newsletters company and enterprises publish news and events online by being certified by management of these social media application. The news yet considered to be reported objective, has actually processed by social media through deliberate emphasis on a certain detail. Consequently, readers' opinions will be potentially shaped or even altered. Evidently, Covid-19 pandemic is a period that public opinions are heavily influenced by social media. Due to relatively unstrict public opinion regulation and free atmosphere of people sharing thoughts, authoritative, fake and misunderstanding news are all exposed to users, which weaken people's ability to identify the authenticity and accuracy of a piece of information. According to previous study of media, agenda theory explains how media draw people's attention towards a certain point of a piece of news by deliberately repeating or emphasizing on that point. When there are two events reported, this emphasis will potentially create connection in people's mind. This article looks back on the development of agenda setting theory, explores how Covid-19 related topics shape public opinions.

2. Literature Review

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw published The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media. By doing research on the election of the president of the United States, McCombs, and Shaw found out that media might potentially shape the way of people thinking besides simply conveying information [1]. As a result, there is a significant correlation between the content media emphasized and the importance of awareness of audiences. When the 'agenda' is exposed to the audiences more frequently, people will consider it more meaningful.

In 1974, Goffman's Frame Analysis: An essay on the organization of experience proposed that framing originates from people's experiences from the past and the influence from socio-cultural awareness, enabling people to convert social reality into subjective opinion or thought. Whether framing theory is one of the parts of agenda-setting theory has still been in the discussion [2]. Cappella (1997) claimed that the difference between framing theory and agenda-setting theory is the way of reporting the news. Framing theory focuses more on selecting particular detail of the event or issue to report in order to alter the perspective of audiences by emphasizing attributes of topics. Agenda-setting theory, however, emphasizes that public perception of the significance of the issue increases as the media highlights a particular issue more. With the development and media knowledge, McCombs, Shaw et al., reached the agreement that framing theory becomes a part of second agenda setting. Though there are a few differences from the old agenda-setting theory, framing theory contributes to further explaining how media affects the audience' opinions and decision-making.

3. Overview of Covid-19 Coverage in the Western Media

Since different news publishers will choose a different part of news to highlight when processing the same piece of news, people will have different concerns, thus increasing the diversity of COVID-19-related topics and discussion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the user of social media (SM) has increased rapidly, from approximately 3.1 billion to 4.59 billion between 2018 and 2022, and social media such as Twitter and Instagram have become the main source for people receiving the latest updating news of COVID-19 related news. Amir Karami and Mackenzie Anderson analyzed 80000 anti-quarantine tweets on Twitter and categorized them into 11 groups, finding out that anti-quarantine tweets are not only related to COVID-19 itself but also various topics related to it. All the information on social media can be categorized into mainly three types: 1) real-time updates on the infected population in a global scale; 2) measures to prevent COVID-19; 3) comments on the influences of the virus on the entire society, such as lockdown policy, vaccine, and open business [3]. In the early period of COVID-19, people paid little attention to this virus though experts warned about the danger of COVID-19. Later, public awareness of the danger of the pandemic increased by media reporting the population of people infected frequently. Compared to traditional media like television, social media gives people chances to communicate and share their opinions. By sharing their experiences and perspectives during COVID-19, the validity of the information can be ensured. However, some western social media, by reporting ineffectiveness and falsehoods of the pandemic, deliberately set an 'agenda' of information about the pandemic and the currency of society forward. More exposure to negative news, like economic recession, large-scale scale, and increasing infected population, made more people connect the quarantine policy with unconstitutional and human rights violated actions. Gradually, people paid more attention to external and negative news rather than the COVID-19 pandemic itself, resulting in people concerning several social damages the pandemic brought rather than caring for their health condition only. Adding insult to injury, some authoritative media deliberately stress particular points to create anxiety, creating outrage, and anger among people. Misconception exerts a long-lasting influence as well, as a massive number of updated news makes people struggle between social truth and rumors, exacerbating outrage [4]. To mitigate anxiety, applications like tweeter and Instagram are supposed to grant and keep stressing public health institutions as authoritative accounts. By making appropriate prevention suggestions and measures

appear more frequently on social media, people's awareness of the significance of prevention will increase, and people will tend to follow the advice of institutions.

4. Characteristics of News Reports under the Agenda-setting

4.1. Orientation of News Coverage

At the entry point of basic agenda setting, it is characteristic of the Western media to ensure that the content of media reports is detailed, informative and, to some extent, well-developed enough to reflect the orientation of the guide [5]. It is easy to understand that the media are already well prepared for the story they are going to cover under the basic agenda setting, which makes modern media fast, convenient and time-sensitive. For example, there is a simple analogy, the host invites the guests to taste the meal of his own chef, has been informed in advance of the taste of the guests, and has received the host's permission from the recipe cook, the dish often made very suitable to the taste of the guests, and spread out on the table quickly. What is important to know is that the mainstay of the Westwind mainstream media is no longer the Times that many stereotypical old Londoners read on the tube, but has shifted more to the social networking media represented by Twitter and Instagram. With a tweet, the audience receives a well-crafted, agenda-setting, time-sensitive and detailed social media tweet. This is an all-ages reach for the audience.

4.2. Control the Direction of Public Opinion

According to McCombs, the mass media directs which questions people think about [6]. American scholar Iyengar, on the other hand, argues that the mass media not only directs the direction and perspective of people's thinking, but also how they think about these issues [7]. That is, their attitudes and the way they think. During the Vietnam War, when the US military sent fewer troops to the front, the media reported an increase, while when more troops were sent, the relevant reports decreased [8]. This shows that the media coverage was at odds with the reality of the situation. However, the public's assessment of the importance of the war closely followed the amount of media coverage. In other words, it is not the reality of the situation and what actually happened that influences the public's judgement, but the reality created by the media that really influences this public opinion and the audience under it. In the early stages of the new crown outbreak, some Western media reported that the virus came from the Chinese city of Wuhan, which led to public discrimination against the Chinese and Chinese communities. However, the fact remains that scientists are still investigating the source and mode of transmission of the virus. Some mainstream media outlets have claimed mortality figures of 10% or higher for the new coronavirus, which has caused public panic and concern. In fact, however, mortality rates depend on many factors, such as age, health status and geographical location.

And in terms of political stance, a certain number of Western media outlets have used outbreak coverage to support particular political stances or political figures. For example, some media would report that certain political figures were right to take measures against the epidemic while being critical of the measures of other political figures.

Media coverage had a huge impact on public opinion and judgement during the new crown epidemic. Therefore, the public needs to remain rational and objective, obtain information from multiple sources, and think and assess independently.

4.3. Enhance Public Cohesion

The human mind is limited and full of inertia and inertia compared to the complexity of the world and the information explosion [9]. The use of agenda-setting theory by Western mainstream media to enhance public cohesion is a double-edged sword, with its advantages and disadvantages.

Firstly, agenda-setting theory can help mainstream media to direct public attention to certain important issues or events, thereby creating public consensus and cohesion. This helps to enhance social stability and unity, and reduce social conflict and division. In addition, by enhancing public

cohesion, the mainstream media can also strengthen the authority and influence of the government, thereby improving its ability to govern.

However, there are some problems with agenda-setting theory. Firstly, the mainstream media may selectively cover certain events and ignore other important issues, thereby influencing public judgement and decision-making. Secondly, the mainstream media sometimes misuse agenda-setting theory to try to manipulate public sentiment and behaviour for their own purposes. This can lead to a loss of public trust and distrust in the media, and may even call into question democratic values.

The mainstream media should be careful in using agenda-setting theory to ensure that their reporting is objective, fair and comprehensive, and avoid manipulating public sentiment and behaviour. At the same time, the public should also remain rational and critical in their thinking, obtain information in many ways, not be easily influenced by the mainstream media, and form their own independent judgments and decisions.

4.4. Easily Distracted by Public Opinion

Personal thoughts of individuals might be changed or influenced by emphasizing the opinion of others. Donald Trump took advantage of Twitter to frequently express his disapproval of authentic scientific data and public health evaluation by tweeting, retweeting and mentioning in retweets [10]. Donald Trump, a public figure and a strong candidate for the president of the United States of America during the COVID-19 pandemic, denies and criticizes the validity of authoritative public health assessments and overtly disapproved anti-quarantine policy as a way to pull people's attention from pandemic to the election, posing a huge threat to public health. By applying the network agenda-setting model, based on much attention Donald Trump had attained, he made people create and deepen the interrelationship between the election and the pandemic by frequently tweeting and retweeting about COVID-19-related topics. As a result, Donald Trump won enough exposure, further increasing the popularity and exposure of Donald Trump and his election on social media.

4.5. Homogenisation of Content

With the high timeliness and explosion of information, one of the problems facing the products produced by the information factory is the homogenisation of content. According to agenda-setting theory, the media directs public attention and discussion by choosing the topics and angles to be covered. Therefore, if the content of the Western mainstream media is homogenised, it is because there is a consensus or limitation in the choice of topics and angles that these media cover. Secondly, this homogenisation is related to the commercial and political interests of the media. Many Western mainstream media are large multinational corporations that need to consider profits and market share. In this context, these media may be more inclined to cover topics that appeal to a wide audience and remain commercially competitive, rather than those that may be more complex or controversial. In addition, political factors can be a factor in influencing the media's agenda setting. Politicians and political organisations often try to shape public opinion by influencing the topics and angles covered by the media in order to achieve their own political goals. In such cases, the media are subject to political pressure to choose to report on topics that are in line with the current political climate. Overall, the high level of homogenisation of content reported by the Western mainstream media can be attributed to a number of factors. To avoid being influenced by a single perspective, the public can try to obtain information from different sources and compare different points of view.

5. Discussion

No matter how the sources of news have changed as time passed, media potentially shape public opinion. Media bring people a large amount of information but also create misunderstanding and anxiety when information is conveyed in a subjective way, for the media company's sake. This is because the media company wants the news to be as exaggerated as possible in order to draw people's attention, winning more exposure. As a result, people are supposed to change themselves to prevent

harm from confusing and misleading social media. The ability to critically thinking is especially significant. By thinking ahead based on the current circumstance, like analyzing and predicting both positive and negative impacts, people can make a more appropriate decision that will probably minimize the disadvantages.

People can take the following steps in the face of 'tendentious' media campaigns. Firstly, People can be informed through multiple sources to avoid bias caused by a single source of information. Instead of relying on a single media outlet, diversified access to information, including different types of news media, social media, and specialist websites, will bring more comprehensive and objective information, so that people can get a more accurate picture of the facts and context of the incident. In addition to this, people need to improve their critical thinking abilities. One should assess the credibility and veracity of information, as well as the intentions and implications they convey, from different perspectives and sources. Then, digging into in-depth reporting could be the next step. In-depth reporting refers to a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of all aspects of an event through interviews, research, and analysis. Reading in-depth stories can help to understand the complexity and context of events better, leading to a deeper understanding of some of the biases and narrowness of media coverage.

In short, in response to the media's 'tendentious' propaganda, people need to maintain a critical mindset, diversify their access to information, dig deeper into reporting, and pay attention to diverse voices in order to improve their knowledge and understanding of events.

6. Conclusion

This article examines the coverage of Covid-19 by the Western mainstream media from an agenda-setting perspective. It analyses the effects of agenda-setting theory on the direction of public opinion and coverage from this perspective. Firstly, an overview of the main media positions and the logic behind agenda setting is provided through an overview of COVID-19 and the context of the times. Secondly, the article analyses the main features of media coverage under agenda-setting theory. In the orientation of news coverage, the article illustrates the fit of agenda-setting theory through the emerging lens of social media. As for controlling the direction of social opinion, the article uses the example of media coverage during the Vietnam War, which exemplifies the general and common effect of agenda-setting theory by setting the agenda, for example, the amount and sequence of the content of the story to guide the audience to make judgments under the influence of the story. Promoting public cohesion is likewise one of the main roles of the media. Under agenda-setting theory, the audience for a media story is emotionally responsive and aroused, creating an overlap with the desired mental response of the media at a certain point in time. Inevitably, agenda-setting by the media can have negative effects. For example, it leads to a significant homogenisation of their coverage. With such a repetition of similar and template messages, the impact of the media coverage on the audience can be greatly reduced.

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