



Blame Attribution versus Responsibility Assignment in the Metaphors of Health Reporting: A Case Study of COVID 19

Fedaa Mohamed Abdel Aziz, Assistant Professor of Journalism, Faculty of Mass Communication, Ahran Canadian University

This study seeks to understand how health reporting provided by the newspapers in China and America during Covid-19 portrayed either the newspaper responsibility assignment or the blame attribution for the happenings. This study investigates the use of metaphors of the Covid-19 Virus in the health reporting news and how these metaphors helped to construct the concept of a pandemic in the reporting. Metaphors of diseases and illness are a prominent tool in the discourse in the news. The data was extracted from news from the Washington Post and The China Daily Newspapers from January 2020 to May 2020 when the disease was at its peak.

Key words: *Covid 19, Health Reporting, Metaphors, Journalism, Blame Attribution, Responsibility Assignment*

Introduction

When a crisis strikes, various news agencies and newspapers around the world cover the event as they need to respond quickly. The debate is partly related to whether they gain by doing their responsibility assignment accurately or they simply fail entering the tunnel of attributing blame, especially when the crisis is related to health and they are supposed to warn the public about the early precautions or even signs of the disease.

This study seeks to investigate how coronavirus has been reported in the English-language press of China and America. Are they working out their responsibility assignment or are they attributing blame for the happening?



The current study extends the idea of analysing the thematic and episodic media framing. That is why the study will depend on the metaphors as it is an essential framing device where it enables the researchers to easily understand and interpret the journalists' actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors use one or many isolated, linguistic representations to present an explanation of a specific event (Gill & Whedbee, 1997).

Research Problem:

The current study examines the metaphors used to either attribute blame for the coronavirus or the metaphors that attribute their responsibility assignment towards their readers.

Literature Review:

Health Reporting

Newspaper articles were analysed in various studies to investigate the health journalism as in the McCaw, McGlade and McElnay, 2014⁽³⁾ study which analysed the health pieces written in the US and UK newspapers. It was found that there is a low frequency of publishing when compared to PubMed and this may be because there is not enough “promotion of research to newspaper editors by scientists or journals that publish in this area”. Also, the results showed that most of the published articles in both US and UK are highlighting advices and just re-publishing available information and this was analysed during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 and the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009. The researchers returned the newspapers actions due to the readers in need to get information at those times when their health was threatened; as at the time of a health crisis, the readers always look for health information.

Another study (Briggs and Hallin, 2010) was concerned about the health reporting and whether it can be politicised in one way or another or not, by using both the content and discourse analysis. The study worked on the health reporting in The San Diego Union-Tribune newspaper. It concluded that the health reporting was politicised and it was described as “in the post-Vioxx era, roughly equivalent to the post-Watergate era in political reporting”.

Moreover, journalists' perceptions and reporting practices were analysed in (Thompson, 2019) study which aimed at finding out how the Ghanaian journalists reported about the Ebola outbreak. The study revealed that the Ghanaian journalists are “underdeveloped” in health reporting as they caused “fear and panic” according to the respondents under study expressions. Also, they had problems in translating the scientific terms related to Ebola and that caused inaccuracy in the coverage.



Also, the (Keshvari et al, 2018) study explored the Iranian health journalists' features and how they reported and what problem did they face while reporting. Results clarified that their health knowledge is moderate, closer to being poor as they are not trained especially in health but highlighting that this is one of the main reasons for the challenges they face.

Adding to this the (El-Jardali et al, 2015) study investigated the media role in enriching the readers with the health information in Arabic, English and French newspapers published in Lebanon in 2012 – 2013. Results showed that health reporting is not one of the main priorities in Lebanon and that returns to their culture and if they reported, they inform the people about a new disease, covering a health conference or event and investigate any topic related to health like vaccines. Also, it was concluded that there is a severe lack in the evidence used in the health reporting.

The Leask, Hooker and King (2010) study also questioned the ways the Australian journalists' fetch and shape the news when reporting about health in 2006 – 2007. Findings showed that the journalists depended on the official sources to get their information and that enabled them to perform accurate coverage. It seemed that concepts of objectivity helped them to explain and justify the possible conflict but “also prevented them from acknowledging that all news is constructed and hence never solely ‘factual’”.

Blame Attribution

People tend to seek someone to blame, either predator, victim or even the system itself. They always search for attributing the blame. A look into the language used to identify and find out where blame is attributed in the news reporting is a research question worthy of analysis.

The Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese (2019) study examined how blame is attributed in the news coverage at the times of elections and non-elections by using content analysis. The researchers were keen to know if journalists can easily blame the major actor in the coverage or not - “journalists are active in framing issues in populist ways themselves”. Findings showed that the populist blame framing was present towards the elite and it shows up only when there is an interpretive journalistic style.

The language used by the journalists was explored in the Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018¹⁰⁾ study to find out the blame attribution. The journalists who were examined were the ones who cover people involved in sexual assault on U.S. college campuses. The researchers tried to find out the attribution assigned to those people in the coverage by applying the attribution theory. Results revealed that the dominant language used was full of support towards while “40% included verbs of doubt for the victim's statements” where blame was present.



Also, the Wang (2018) study investigated the blame attribution framing and its effect on people's attitudes "trust, satisfaction, willingness to visit, perceived expertise and perceived reputation" after publishing medical-mistakes-related news stories. Results showed that there is an effect as it leads the readers to be more angry and disappointed and consequently afraid because of the medical mistakes.

The blame frame was also questioned in the (Holton et al, 2012) study as it explored sources that were used to attribute blame in MMR–Autism Vaccination Scare. Also, it tried to seek understanding if a change occurred in news media attributions of blame over time or not. Findings showed that science/medical sources were more probable to attribute blame to "Andrew Wakefield and other individual actors". In addition, it revealed that the changes that occurred increased over time.

Theoretical Framework:

The current study will depend on the Attribution Theory to analyse how news stories are attributed to either responsibility or blame.

The origins of this theory return to Fritz Heider. In A First Look at Communication Theory Book, (Em Griffin, n.d.) it was stated the three-step process the theory depends on are "Was action observed? – Was action intended? – Was action coerced?". In other words, the theorist tried to observe the action, then find out whether it was intentional or accidental and finally defining the categorisation of the behaviour examining whether the actor was internally or externally motivated.

In the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory Book (2009), the extension of this theory by Bernard Weiner was highlighted as he examined the ways people "explain their own and others' success and failure". He divided these explanations into three proportions which are "locus of control (Whose fault is it?), stability (Is it ongoing?), and controllability (Can I change it?)". Also, it was explained that there is a fundamental attribution error which is when exaggeration happens in any negative situation and people starts underestimating "people overemphasize the situational causes and underestimate the dispositional causes".

Methodology:

The researcher uses the rhetorical approach of metaphoric criticism, where metaphors become the main point of analysis targeting better understanding of how they work to analyse a specific view or angle. Also, metaphoric criticism examines the metaphor as a method by which language is



used to find out the reality, or even the meaningful experience or phenomenon (Ivie, 1982; Osborn & Ehniger, 1962).

Study Time Frame

The data of the study encompasses newspapers electronic version articles for a period of five months from January 2020, the time of the outbreak of the disease, to May 2020, after the world started ending the quarantine and people started returning to their daily life routines.

Study Sample

The Washington Post and The China Daily electronic newspapers were analysed in this study.

Study Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

- How was the responsibility assignment for coronavirus symbolised through using metaphors in the health reporting?
- How was the attribution of blaming symbolised through using metaphors in the health reporting?

Results

- Sources attribution was the key factor of analysis.
- Their responsibility assignment and the blame attribution were equally present through the sources' attribution. In other words, the reporting included accurate information as it depended on facts and sources' attribution which meant that they worked their responsibility assignment as the real media's role. On the other hand, in The China Daily, all these attributions involved the metaphors that included the blame words either by trying to prove that China was innocent and the one throwing blame on them was mistaken or by blaming America for putting the fault on them.
- The Washington Post had a more moderate tone and was working out its responsibility assignment well.
- The blame was pointed to China by the American President Trump and high-ranking administration officials for the spread of the virus on China.
- Conceptual metaphors were used in the health reporting about the coronavirus. There were journalists who wrote "Chinese Virus" and "Wuhan Virus" which are metaphors for "Covid-19 Virus".
- This metaphor was a tool for blame attribution.

- However, the “Chinese Virus”, “Wuhan Virus” and “Wuhan Pneumonia” was stated in the American President Donald Trump’s speeches either on Television or social networking sites accounts; the Washington Post newspaper never labeled the Covid-19 in its reporting by these metaphors.
- On the other hand, the Washington Post newspaper made it clear in some of their published articles that using these metaphors are rejected according to Asian lawmakers.

Example:

- As the disease began to take hold in the United States, **Asian lawmakers urged officials not to reference it as the “China virus” or the “Wuhan virus,”** after the city where it originated. Rep. Judy Chu (D-Calif.) sent a letter to her congressional colleagues on Feb. 26 urging them to stop using terminology that stokes fear and prejudice against Asian Americans.
- The metaphors “Chinese Virus” was used in the China Daily Newspaper when a source was criticising what the American President Donald Trump said. Most of the criticism was attributed to sources. The newspaper highlighted different messages through its coverage like reminding the people about H1N1 which was never called “North American flu”, even though it originated in North America.

Examples:

- Lately, United States officials have been pointing the finger of blame at China, with US President Donald Trump calling the virus "**Chinese Virus**" and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticising China's handling of the outbreak.
- On Monday, European Union foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, also said that it is not a time to blame each other, such as by using the word "**Chinese virus**".
- No doubt there is political motive behind US President Donald Trump labeling the novel coronavirus as the "**Chinese virus**". Especially, since he insists on using it despite the advice of the World Health Organization not to do so. Eventually, he softened his tone on Monday under domestic pressure.
- No wonder the WHO disapproved the use of "**Chinese virus**" by Trump. Some other international organizations and several global leaders, too, criticised Trump for using the term, stressing that viruses have no borders, and "it is important to be careful with the language" and to not relate it "to a specific ethnic group or nationality". For example, the H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009 originated in North America, but we don't call it the "North American flu", said Mike Ryan, WHO executive director for health emergencies.

- It's also why Trump insists on calling SARS-CoV2 the "**Chinese virus**", despite the WHO agreeing in 2015 to best practices in naming human diseases that would omit regions so as to avoid stigmatising people groups. He frames the naming as a uniquely current issue, framing the WHO as being in China's pocket and helping China in its "cover up."
- Although the World Health Organization has named the coronavirus COVID-19 to avoid stigmatising, Trump continued calling COVID-19 the "**Chinese virus**" for weeks.
- In the China Daily, the metaphors "Chinese Virus" and the "Wuhan Virus" were considered labels given by the Americans and spread by the newspapers considering it as a fact; they considered it as attack from different countries towards China, in addition to linking using these words to xenophobia.

Examples:

- As reported in the German newspaper Der Spiegel, as well as the Washington Post, the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting on Wednesday, which includes the U.S, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan, failed to produce a joint statement at the end of the meeting due to the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's insistence in having the COVID-19 formally described as the "**Wuhan virus**."
- There is a reason why US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has on several occasions referred to the novel coronavirus as the "**Wuhan virus**" ignoring the advice of Beijing and global health officials to avoid using terms that could incite xenophobia.
- As reported in various newspapers, Mike Pompeo, obsessed with American unilateralism and geopolitical competition, literally attempted to keep the virus off the agenda but described it as the "**Wuhan virus**," focusing exclusively on China. Not surprisingly, the others didn't agree. Pompeo's obsession with attacking China literally superseded the urgency of helping allies in need and affirming international solidarity.
- Zhao noted that other high-level US officials have repeatedly used similar names and labels such as "**Chinese virus**" and "**Wuhan virus**".
- The word "accuse" was rarely used in both the Washington Post and The China Daily, but both used it for different goals.
- It was used in The China Daily when it described the newspaper's negative attitude towards the accusations their country was facing. Noting here that this is from their media responsibility as the media should correct their images in front of the world as they are being attacked by the American President.

Example:

What we oppose, however, is unfounded charges against China. **One should not accuse China first** and then run so-called international investigations just to make up the evidence. This is arbitrary investigation based on the presumption of guilt. – stated by: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng

- While it was used in the Washington Post to oppose the attacks the patients face when they are Covid-19 carriers.

Example:

- “Since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have seen a surge of discriminatory rhetoric and violent attacks against Asian Americans across the country,” Chu wrote in a letter signed by members of the Asian Pacific American Caucus. She added: “Even just looking Asian has been enough to incite attackers to hurl insults and **accuse individuals of being disease carriers.**”
- There is one new metaphor used in the Washington Post newspaper which is “bat virus” but it was not used as a label for China. It was just a metaphor to indicate that this virus originated from the bat animals.

Examples:

- Scientists say the virus arose naturally in bats. Even so, Pompeo and others have pointed fingers at an institute that is run by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It has done groundbreaking research tracing the likely origins of the SARS virus, **finding new bat viruses** and discovering how they could jump to people.
- The highlights of the Wuhan researchers’ work on **bat viruses** are spelled out in more than 40 published studies and academic papers that describe a sprawling, ambitious effort to document the **connection between bats and recent disease outbreaks in China.**
- War metaphors are present in the China Daily newspaper only.
- War metaphors include the words fight – attack – battle – combat – defend, etc....
- The virus is also shown as a war against a common enemy of the people.
- War metaphors were used in the Chinese discourse, once the government wanted everyone to know that they are going to fight the virus which they consider as their enemy in a battle. Also, they are fighting for collaboration between the countries to **combat** COVID-19 and save the world and through this they announced their battle plan.

Examples:

- "It takes no cleverness to inflame feelings with glib rhetoric or political insults," Kuhn said. "Rational people must work together, not allow fringe invective to erode the capacity to **fight** a common enemy.
 - Ancient philosopher Xunzi has also said that in Confucian doctrine, it is essential to use the names properly "to be able to **fight** against chaos".
 - The **battle** we are **fighting** calls for collaboration. This is the time to collect experiences and see how China and other Asian countries have fared in the fight against the epidemic. That medical aid is now moving from East to West proves they have fared better than others.
 - Branstad said, "No one country can **fight this battle** alone, and I am confident that our two countries will continue to find ways to jointly cooperate to combat this common enemy that threatens the lives of all of us."
 - Pompeo seldom misses an opportunity to publicly smear China on the global stage, often exceeding all reason. However, this move doesn't look smart and nor is it beneficial to anyone. Other countries' representatives saw the meeting as an opportunity to affirm urgent international solidarity and cooperation to **combat** COVID-19.
- War itself was used as a metaphor in the health reporting to express different points.
 - Firstly, it was used to represent the sources' attitudes and emotions towards China, expressing and highlighting the racism in their attributions. One of the main figures in the newspaper was the American President Donald Trump.

Example:

- "Trump is now exploiting the naming of a virus to sustain and **escalate his war against China**. Once we understand his **racist rhetoric** within such a context, it is hard to imagine that he will apologize," Zhao continued.
- Secondly, it was used to express the world's war over the Covid-19 Virus considering it the Chinese War.

Examples:

- "It is my belief that the World Health Organization must be supported, as it is absolutely critical to the **world's efforts to win the war against COVID-19**," Guterres said on April 8, one day after Trump criticised the WHO's response to COVID-19 and threatened to freeze US funding for it.
- "Some want to score points in this era," Perry said. "But one thing is for sure all nations are following the **Chinese war against the virus**. The danger in the world is being countered by leading figures refusing to use this term".

- Thirdly, it was used to describe many problems that popped up since the Covid-19 virus spread such as “communication war”, “trade war” and “new cold war”, etc....

Examples:

- "This is a **communication war**, and it is one in which the US president is playing hardball and taking the lead," Zhao, who is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, wrote to China Daily in an interview.
 - Janis Frayer: So it is a **disinformation war**? If the US is engaging in disinformation, is that why China is engaging in disinformation as well? Merely asking if it is the position on the Chinese side to allow this sort of disinformation or theories to be distributed or amplified by state media and on the websites of Chinese embassies.
 - Le Yucheng: Inside the United States, there are some negative views or comments with regard to China. But I also know that many Americans with fair judgment are calling for more cooperation with China. They oppose decoupling and a **new Cold War**.
- The Washington Post newspaper depended on only using the metaphor “combat” as Americans already believes that they need to stay home, so they can combat the virus to save themselves.

Example:

- A memo is drafted by health officials and the National Security Council about the potential need for “quarantine and isolation measures **to combat the virus**,” per the Times, but a scheduled meeting to brief Trump on the plan is later cancelled.
- In the China Daily newspaper, the responsibility metaphors in the Covid-19 case were different than any other health diseases as the word responsibility here was attached to blaming the American President Donald Trump and referring to him as being “weak and irresponsible”, not asking people to be socially responsible in terms of “hygiene, precautions and social distance, etc...”. In addition to its attachment to the positive roles for the Chinese government towards conducting their jobs accurately trying to save lives.

Example:

- Pelosi said in a statement. "This is another case, as I have said, of the president's ineffective response, **that 'a weak person, a poor leader, takes no responsibility.** A weak person blames others."

- In this case, once again **responsibility lies with the White House** and it also further exposes the administration's **dishonesty** in claiming that it wanted to help China, both in prevention and treatment.
 - China has been open, transparent, with good faith, and truthful when it comes to the release of data. **We bear in mind our responsibility to history**, to the people and to the lives lost to COVID-19.
- Disaster metaphors (flood – earthquake – etc....) was not present in both the Washington Post and The China Daily newspapers.
 - Science metaphors of Covid-19 in both the Washington Post and The China Daily newspapers were associated with being a pandemic.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that:

- Responsibility assignment is always present in health reporting.
- Blame attribution occurs in the context of “politics of blame”.
- Blame is communally constructed upon a specific criterion of attribution of causation and responsibility.
- Blame attribution happens when someone posing a threat or a burden or even responsible in one way or another for a negative development/situation.
- Blame attribution differs from a newspaper reporting to another due to several factors such as:
 - 1- The disease origin (Someone blaming – Someone defending the blames thrown on them)
 - 2- Number of deaths in the country (High – Low) – (If it is high, that means that country is not controlling which means they have health system failures and therefore trying to blame others to distract people.)
 - 3- Political battles (In this case study: The United States Vs. China – Two powerful countries)
 - 4- The extent of Win/Loss for the country
- Repeating the labels or the stereotypes in the reporting may cause it to be a forever metaphor.



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