

The UK media coverage of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak

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Abstract

This article addresses one question: how is the coronavirus outbreak and its management in China reported in the UK media in general, and on the Internet in particular? It does so by examining how the online versions of *the BBC*, *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail* reported on the coronavirus outbreak in China, but more importantly, on how China handled it, over a 20-week timeframe. The sentiment analysis and thematic analysis show that although the selected media are of different types in the United Kingdom, the themes and topics are not substantially different from each other. This implies that the general media-consuming public in the United Kingdom would regard China's handling of the virus as largely negative or neutral. However, the ways of discussing and presenting those topics were subject to variation between the publications, which in turn is reflected in the attitudes and perceptions of their readers.

Keywords

China, COVID-19, pattern, representation, sentiment analysis, thematic analysis, UK media

Introduction

China's representation in the world's media has long been an overtly sensitive matter, particularly for the Chinese people, among whom there exists a widespread belief 'that the "Western media" present a systematically, and maliciously, distorted account of Chinese realities' (Sparks, 2010, p. 347). According to Sparks (2010), in the year of 2008, when the Summer Olympics was held in

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Beijing, popular national newspapers in the United Kingdom offered very little coverage of China. Only elite newspapers such as the Financial Times covered China regularly and in-depth. However, as China continues to grow in global importance economically and politically, we observe that China is receiving more coverage, moving from what was categorized as the peripheral to the 'elite' nations (Sparks, 2010) in terms of exposure in international coverage in the UK media.

This study examines how *the BBC*, *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail* reported on the coronavirus outbreak in China, but more importantly, on how China handled it, over a 20-week timeframe from January to May 2020, to examine one major research question: how is the coronavirus outbreak and its management in China reported in the UK media in general, and on the Internet, in particular? In answering this question, we examine and analyse the three selected news media's relevant online articles with a focus on their headlines and leads, which function as an initial summary and express the most important elements of the text (van Dijk, 1988b, p. 53). In doing so, we will decipher a sense of whether there are repeated patterns of representations, which may lead readers to form a preferred reading and interpretation of what was happening in China and how China was dealing with the outbreak. After all, 'information is one of the most powerful tools, not only to just inform, but also to alarm people and create panic' (Almazán-Ruiz & Orrequia-Barea, 2020, p. 1).

It is important that our findings are understood within the context of the perceptible increase in nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiment within the United Kingdom in recent years, brought to the fore primarily through the United Kingdom's polarizing 2016 referendum on (and subsequent departure from) membership of the European Union (EU; Bell, 2020). During this time, several of the United Kingdom's tabloids – including *the Daily Mail*, which advocated leaving the EU – were accused of being overwhelmingly negative on the effects of immigration (Moore & Ramsay, 2017), which Rzepnikowska (2019) claims demonstrates a link between xenophobic attitudes in British people and the politics/populist media of the Leave campaign discourse. Simultaneously, the US Government's increasingly hostile rhetoric towards China has provoked headlines around the globe.

It is also important to recognize right at the start the limitations of the article. First, it is not the intention of this article to find out whether the reports are 'true' or 'accurate'. It is undeniable that social traits are always present in news discourse, and in that sense, news is not a totally objective reflection of events (Fowler, 2013, pp. 2–4, cited in Almazán-Ruiz & Orrequia-Barea, 2020). Sparks (2010) also points out that 'it is self-evident that Western media coverage of China is going to be selective in one way or another' (p. 352). What we want to find out is whether there is a pattern in topics and themes occurring, which promotes a 'preferred reading' over the course of the virus' development in and outside China. Second, we agree with Sparks (2010) that 'audiences interpret the media in a complex series of ways, and it is impossible to assert that what is in the media is reproduced in the minds of the audience' (p. 348). So although we acknowledge the potential power of media discourse as the bridge between the audience and the depiction of reality as Montgomery (2007) states, it is wrong to overstate the link between what we find from the three media sites with what the readers in the UK interpret, especially when 'the social composition of the readership of different papers is very different' (Sparks, 2010, p. 350).

Theoretical underpinnings of the project: van Dijk's news schemata

There is a plethora of literature examining what is being represented – and how – in the mass media. Many concepts such as agenda-setting, priming and framing have been advanced to help

understand the processes at work. Our study is inspired by van Dijk's (1985) news schemata, whereby headlines, together with leads which may or may not be present, structurally function to express the major topics of the text. van Dijk (1988a) regards headlines as the most prominent feature of news discourse: 'They subjectively express the most important information of the text, that is, the main topic or the top of the semantic macrostructure' (p. 226). But more importantly, for this project, 'they define the situation and, thus, programme the reader with a preferred reading and interpretation plan' (van Dijk, 1988a, p. 226). Likewise, Dor (2003) explains that headlines can be considered 'relevance optimizers' because they help readers create the best context to interpret the issue. Thus, headlines 'are designed to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers' (Dor, 2003, p. 695). Therefore, within the context of a news report, the headlines assume a central and revealing role in the (re)production of ideologies (Zhang, 2006). In our data set, we include leads as well because 'there is not just one topic or possible summary of a text, but several' (van Dijk, 1985, p. 75). By including the leads, we are expanding the data set in order to better capture the main themes as well as the sub-themes in the articles in our corpus.

Methodology: a comparative study of three cases in the United Kingdom

The first decision we had to make was the timeframe within which to examine the United Kingdom's media representation of the coronavirus outbreak in China and its management. The beginning of January 2020 becomes the starting point of our investigation, as our pilot study shows that this was the point that the new coronavirus started to make a meaningful appearance in international media coverage in the United Kingdom, although it was not until 21 January that the Chinese authorities confirmed that there was human-to-human transmission. At this stage of the epidemic, the UK population read the new virus outbreak as something happening in a geographically and/or culturally distant place. February saw the increase of coronavirus cases in China and the beginning of the spread of the pandemic throughout the rest of the world. From 28 March, after China's initial struggle, and following ruthless control measures and mobilization of resources to curb the spread of the virus, China started to close its borders, from air to land, to avoid imported cases of the new coronavirus. As its economy began to recover, China started to earn goodwill by exporting and donating vital medical supplies and doctors to stricken countries. At this stage, UK citizens, like those everywhere else, were not only reading about this threat but experiencing it. Reading or watching the news to stay informed became one of the essential elements in people's lives since many had to confine themselves to avoid the contagion and the uncontrolled spread of the disease. To capture the variations in media coverage patterns over the development of the disease – its rise, fall and containment in China in the context of its development around the world – we decided to build a 20-week corpus from Monday, 6 January to Sunday, 24 May 2020.

The second challenge was to decide what media (and what versions, that is, print or online) in the United Kingdom to examine. It is wrong to assume that the UK media constitute a uniform category that exhibits similar news values, interests and interpretations across all the titles. It has been observed that the national daily press in the United Kingdom is highly differentiated in terms of content, readership and outlook (Sparks, 1999). In trying to capture representative titles and readership in the United Kingdom, we decided to examine coverage of China in the left-wing leaning Guardian, the right-leaning Daily Mail, and finally the BBC, whose responsibility is known to provide impartial public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Apart from their political orientations, *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail* also belong to two traditionally distinct media types in the United Kingdom: *the Guardian* is known as a national broadsheet or quality paper, while *the*

Daily Mail is known as a mid-market tabloid or popular paper targeted at a lower middle and upper working-class demographic (Toolan, 2016), that has a readership profile quite close to the national norm (Sparks, 2010). In addition to their size distinction, broadsheet newspapers are generally associated with serious and intellectual subjects, while tabloids usually contain less serious news items and regularly focus on celebrity coverage and more popular interest stories (Almazán-Ruiz & Orrequia-Barea, 2020). According to Dor (2003), broadsheet readers are supposed to be ‘more proficient, cognitively-energetic and curious’ (p. 719) than readers who usually prefer tabloids.

Besides their representativeness on ideology and nature of news reports, these three media are also selected for their popularity, especially their online versions. According to Ofcom (2019), 66% of UK adults in 2019 consumed news through the Internet, up 2% on the 2018 figure. Among these adults, the youngest generation (those aged 16–24) demonstrates an even stronger tendency towards online news consumption (83%). According to Ofcom (2019) again, almost half of the UK adult population (49%) consume news through newspapers and their associated websites/apps. Statistics show *the Daily Mail* to be the most widely read news title in the United Kingdom, with a readership of 9.62 million per week in 2018, of which the printed version attracts 4.57 million, and digital readership totals 4.11 million, with the remaining 0.94 million comprised of readers who consume both equally (Ofcom, 2019, subsequent readership figures appearing in this paragraph are also taken from this publication). *The Guardian* is the most widely read digital news title in the United Kingdom, with a total readership of 8.03 million per week in 2018, of which digital accounts for 5.24 million and print totals 1.39 million, with the remaining 1.40 million comprised of readers who consume both equally. The BBC News website/app is used by 65% of UK news consumers who said they consume news through the Internet (which was 66% of the total sample). Looking at these three publications, therefore, covers 28.42% of UK newspaper media consumption (58% of 49%) and 42.9% of Internet news consumption (65% of 66%).¹ In this way, we can claim that these three chosen online media versions are the most important from the point of view of public information and knowledge of national and international issues. One of the motivations for this article is to elucidate whether or not there are noteworthy differences among them when dealing with the same health issue.

Sentiment analysis and thematic analysis

In our investigation, we first apply sentiment analysis to the 20-week data set to determine if the news reports lean towards positive, neutral or negative emotions based on an appraisal of the question ‘is the statement expressing a positive, neutral or negative view of China’s handling of coronavirus?’ Thematic analysis is then employed in our study ‘for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis ‘minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). However, ‘frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic’ (Boyatzis, 1998, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In our study, it not only provides a rich thematic description of our entire data set, but it also provides detailed and nuanced accounts of one particular theme, or group of themes, within the data set, which helps us to get a sense of what the reader is getting through the predominant or important themes. In our thematic analysis, we follow Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data,
2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes,

4. Reviewing themes,
5. Defining and naming themes,
6. Producing the report.

In all of the three cases, an attempt is made to determine whether the identified articles are ‘selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 5).

Data capture, processing and encoding

To construct the data set, we used Google’s advanced search operators to retrieve articles from each publication site² based on the keywords (coronavirus) and (China). We collected the first five articles from each of the 20 weeks, intending to capture 100 in total for each of the chosen media. To ensure validity of the results, we conducted some manual searches for comparison. We noticed that Google could return results with slight ordering differences for the same search executed in different sessions. However, the differences were not significant enough to cause any changes in our findings.

During the data capturing process, it was noted that there was only one article available for the first week of the sample from *the BBC*, just two from *the Daily Mail* and only four from *the Guardian*. This resulted in a total of 292 articles (96 for *the BBC*, 97 for *the Daily Mail* and 99 for *the Guardian*).

After we cleaned the three data sets and got rid of information unrelated to the specific content of each article, we coded the data manually for sentiment. We then imported the data into NVivo in order to perform thematic coding. Once coded, charts were produced within NVivo to illustrate the coding prevalence of individual data sets across the 20 weeks of enquiry. These individual charts were then consolidated to produce a graphical representation of the theme’s distribution and movement for the three data sets across the collection timeframe.

Analysis and result discussions

In this section, the study of data sets is detailed at the same time that the results are discussed. We first conduct a sentiment analysis to identify and categorize the tones expressed in the three media sites, especially in order to determine whether the articles’ attitude towards a particular topic or theme is positive, negative or neutral. The sentiment analysis is enriched by additional data extracted from the headlines and leads. This is followed by a thematic analysis to establish possible trends and patterns within the media coverage.

Sentiment analysis and results

The headlines and leads fall into three categories according to their semantic aspect: the first type is categorized as positive, which includes those reporting on China’s success in containing the outbreak. The second type is categorized as ‘negative’, which consists of criticisms and accusations towards China from its initial slow response to the COVID-19 outbreak, its tough handling of dissidents, to the impact on the global economy. The third category of ‘neutral’ includes those that are neither positive nor negative.

Sentiment analysis for the aggregated data sets as a whole appears as follows.

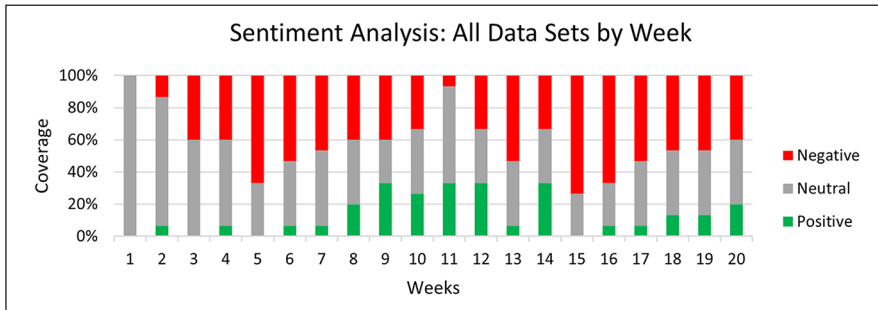


Figure 1. Sentiment analysis: all data sets by week.

Summary:

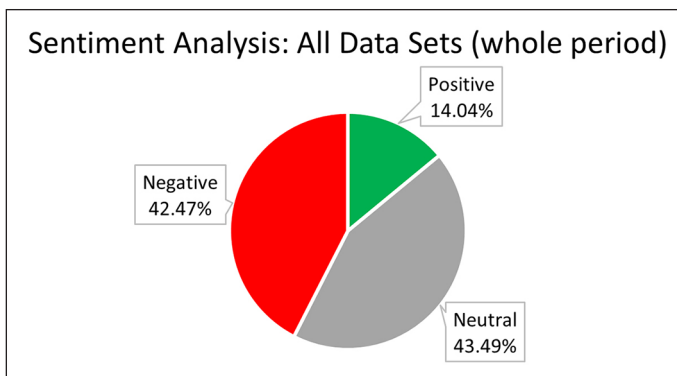


Figure 2. Sentiment analysis: all data sets (whole period).

As the figures above indicate, neutral (43.49%) and negative (42.47%) coverage made up the majority of the corpus. Positive coverage was restricted to just 14.04% of the total. Combined data for each sentiment, plotted chronologically for each data set, reveals the following:

Broadly speaking, the swings in negative/positive news coverage take place in correspondence with the following three developments in the pandemic timeline:

1. Initial panic occurred in the first 5 weeks over the virus' spread within and beyond China's borders, and China's failure to contain it. On 22–23 January (the third week in our data set), a 'lockdown' was decreed in the city of Wuhan, which was the first place in which coronavirus was detected and also the first locality to undertake containment measures. On 30–31 January (week 4 in our data set), the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). It was from week 5 that the virus became seen as a real threat in the reporting, as coronavirus started to spread beyond China's borders, with the emergence of cases in different countries, including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

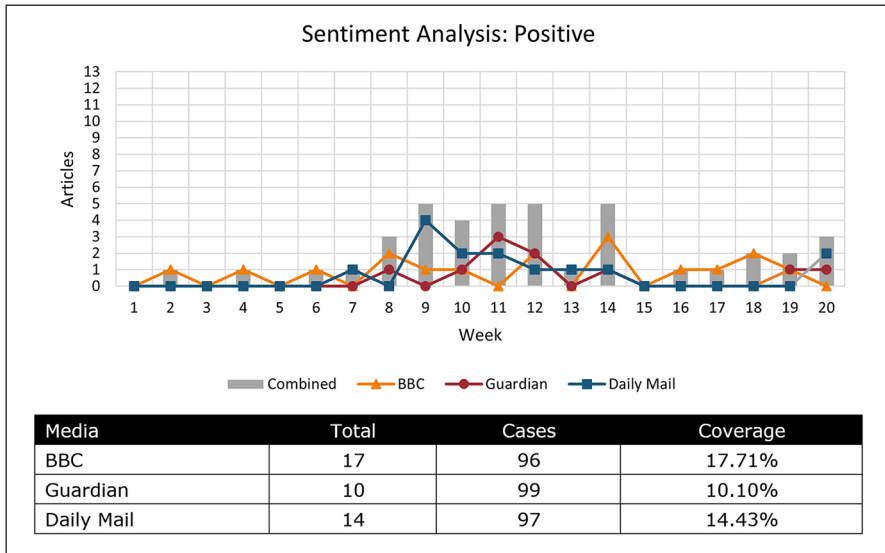


Figure 3. Chronological sentiment analysis: articles coded as positive
 Source: Positive reports percentages from the three websites.

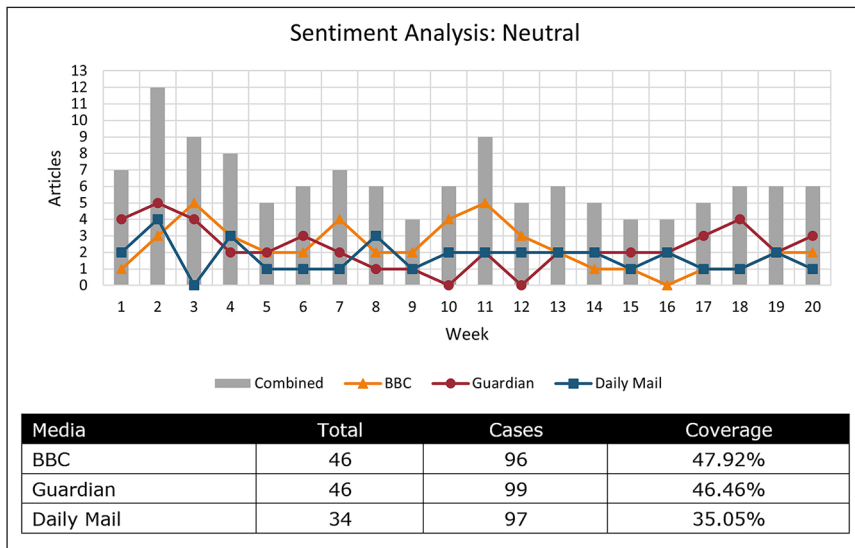


Figure 4. Chronological sentiment analysis: articles coded as neutral
 Source: Neutral reports percentage from the three websites.

2. During weeks 10 and 11, tempered praise was the predominant tone for China at appearing to have gained control of the virus within its own borders, along with suggestions that other countries should look to China as an example.

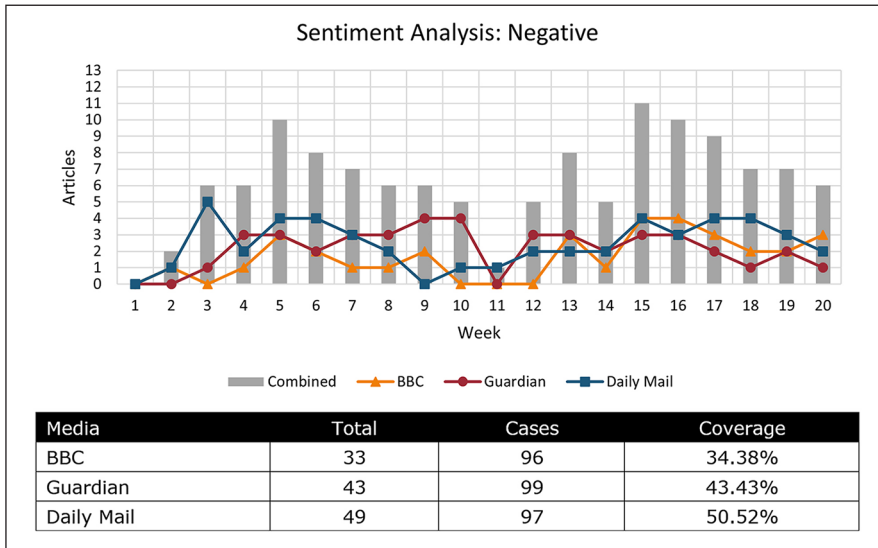


Figure 5. Chronological sentiment analysis: articles coded as negative.

Source: Negative reports percentage from the three websites.

- From week 13 onwards, with the widespread and dramatic increase of cases on a global scale and as the world economy ground to a halt, praise for China stalled, to be replaced with recriminations and accusations about information suppression/delays, alternative theories on the origins of the virus, and China's responsibility for the global economic fallout.

Sets (whole period) compared

As anticipated, our data set shows that *the BBC* offered the most balanced tone of coverage, followed by the left-leaning broadsheet, *the Guardian*. The right-leaning popular tabloid, *the Daily Mail*, exhibited the most unbalanced tone of coverage, with only 35% of articles being classed as neutral regarding China's handling of COVID-19. It also carried the highest proportion (50.52%) of negative articles. *The BBC* carried the least number of negative articles (34.38%).

This is consistent with our finding that *the Daily Mail* employs emphatic typographical devices, such as the use of majuscule text (e.g. see extracts 6, 7 and 8 below) for highlighting informational importance within the headline (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). In addition, this device may serve to lure the reader towards a particular story (Blom & Hansen, 2015). In both cases, the outcome can often be associated with sensationalistic news reporting. In their 2020 corpus linguistics study of UK broadsheet and tabloid newspaper coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, Almazán-Ruiz and Orrequia-Barea (2020) also noted that capitalization of words within story headlines was a more frequent occurrence in their tabloid newspaper data sets than among the broadsheets.

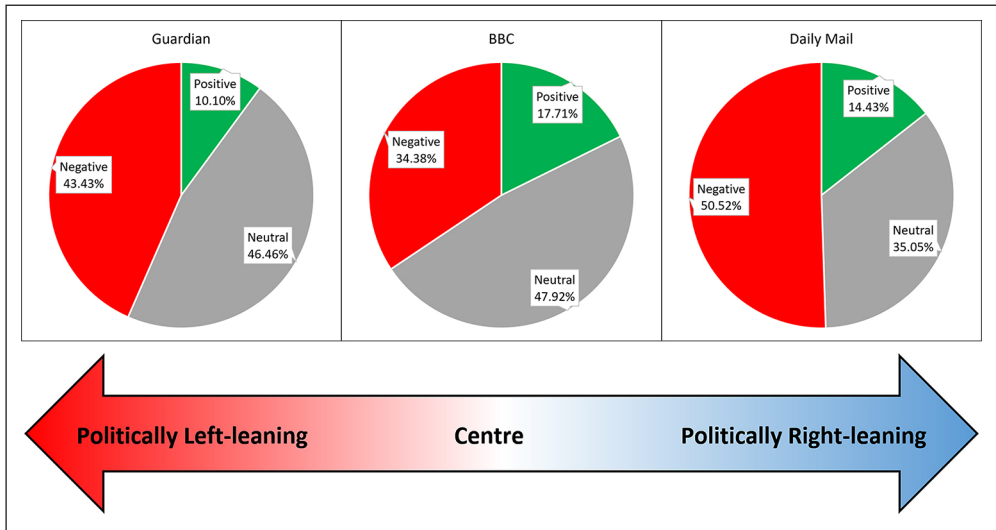


Figure 6. Sentiment analysis comparison for the three data sets

Thematic analysis and results

We next move to the topics or themes identified from the three data sets, which provide a clear indication as to how topics/themes in the representations of China in these media increase and decrease in prominence, that is, the overall story they tell about the pandemic and its management in China over the 20-week timeframe.

Table 1 represents the main themes and sub-themes from the data sets. There are other sub-themes, but they are either not significant enough with one or two instances throughout the whole data set, or have no direct relation with other themes. These sub-themes are, therefore, not given space for discussion.

The following diagram better visualizes the relationship between the main and sub-themes, with only ‘praise for China’s handling of COVID-19’ being a top-level theme without sub-themes.

Criticisms and accusations

Under this theme of criticisms and accusations are four sub-themes in the data set: criticism of China, China criticizing other countries, deteriorating Sino–US relationships, and questioning China’s truthfulness.

Criticism of China. Criticism of China exhibits two peaks (week 5 and weeks 15–17), and one trough (week 11).

They correspond to the three periods in the pandemic outlined in the sentiment analysis:

- Information on COVID-19 originating in China and spreading outwards,
- Stories of China’s containment efforts,

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Criticisms and accusations	(a) Criticism of China (b) China criticizing other countries (c) Deteriorating Sino–US relations (d) Questioning China’s truthfulness
2. China’s response	(a) Admission of error or fault (b) Economic response or impact (c) Response to criticisms
3. Praise for China’s response	(none)

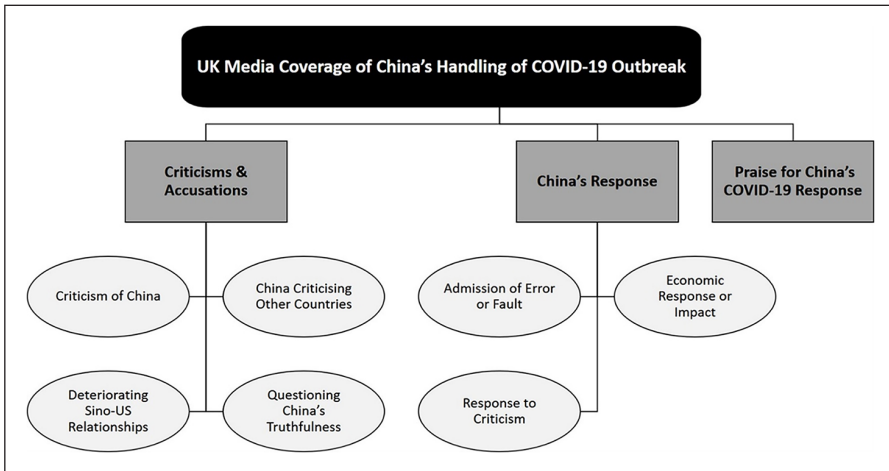


Figure 7. Relationship between themes and sub-themes

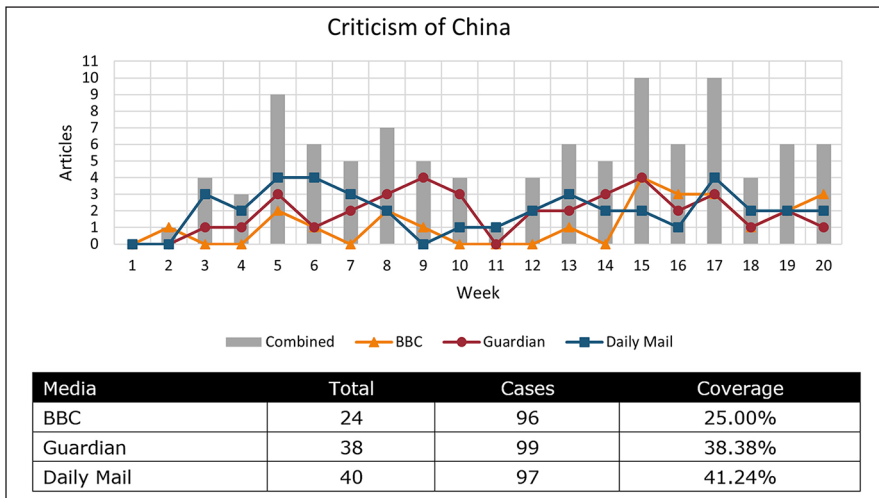


Figure 8. Chronological occurrence of theme: criticism of China

- Reports on repercussions towards China/suspicion of accuracy of Chinese data/theories on virus origin.

Although criticism of China is found in all the three data sets, *the BBC* is found to be more ‘controlled’ in its criticism and always ensures to cite a source, albeit general, for the criticism to achieve a more realistic perspective:

The Daily Mail, unlike *the BBC*, is relentlessly negative and is not always concerned with citing sources for the criticism:

In addition, *the Daily Mail* is more sensational than either *the BBC* or *the Guardian* in packaging its information. In our sample, the capitalization of non-acronym words for emphasis occurs in

- (1) New virus in China ‘will have infected hundreds’. The number of people already infected by the mystery virus emerging in China is far greater than official figures suggest, scientists have told *the BBC* (BBC, 18 January 2020).
- (2) Europe ‘wary of confronting China over deaths’. China is continuing to under-report the true levels of deaths from COVID-19, national security officials in London and Washington believe (BBC, 23 April 23 2020).
- (3) Tory MPs to examine ‘rise of China’. Britain needs a better understanding of China’s economic ambitions and global role when the coronavirus crisis ends, a new group of Tory MPs says (BBC, 25 April 2020).

42 of the 97 articles contained in *the Daily Mail* data set. This typographical device is absent from the other two data sets:

- (4) China built a lab to study Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Ebola in Wuhan – and US biosafety experts warned in 2017 that a virus could ‘escape’ the facility that has become key in fighting the outbreak. The Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory is the only lab in China designated for studying dangerous pathogens like SARS and Ebola (Daily Mail, 23 January 2020).
- (5) Police lock up suspected patients in their home, vigilantes beat up sufferer’s family and woman fights off cops with a meat cleaver as they quarantine her in shocking videos. Trending clip shows policemen locking suspected patients in their home (Daily Mail, 6 February 2020).

The Guardian, while much less sensational than *the Daily Mail*, tends to discuss the matter in relation to human rights, dissidents, or in the framework of government versus dissidents:

We may summarize the discussion on the theme of ‘criticism of China’ by noting that, despite the similar range of topics covered, there seem to be different principles of focus and emphasis

- (6) Wuhan mayor admits ‘withholding information’ about the coronavirus outbreak after revealing FIVE MILLION residents had left the city before it went into lockdown (Daily Mail, 27 January 2020).
- (7) China ADMITS it was too slow to react to coronavirus outbreak which has killed at least 213 people – amid claims that officials are hiding a higher death toll by cremating bodies (Daily Mail, 31 January 2020).
- (8) China ‘forces Italy to BUY back masks and coronavirus supplies it had DONATED to Beijing just weeks earlier’ (Daily Mail, 6 April 2020).

operating in the three media. In the popular tabloid, *the Daily Mail*, there is a loud, strong and persistent emphasis on representing China negatively. *The BBC*, with only 24 articles criticizing

- (9) Dissent becomes the next victim of coronavirus as China cracks down. Analysts say epidemic poses gravest threat to authorities since Tiananmen Square – and Beijing’s tight control could backfire epidemic control measures (Guardian, 19 February 2020).
- (10) Chinese social media censoring ‘officially sanctioned facts’ on coronavirus. Wide range of speech about virus and COVID-19 references is being tightly controlled, report finds (Guardian, 4 March 2020).
- (11) China activist who called Xi clueless on coronavirus faces years in jail for ‘subversion’. Xu Zhiyong is being held in secret detention and has been denied access to a lawyer, say friends (Guardian, 7 March 2020).

China compared with *the Daily Mail*’s 44 articles and *the Guardian*’s 38, presents a much more nuanced picture in its criticism, while *the Guardian* exhibits an emphasis on a politically oriented selection of themes.

China criticizing other countries. In this sub-theme, there are a total of 24 reports on China criticizing other countries between the three publications. *The BBC* carries the least (five) in number, and exhibits a ‘matter of fact’ account of China targeting criticism at the United States (e.g. extract 12

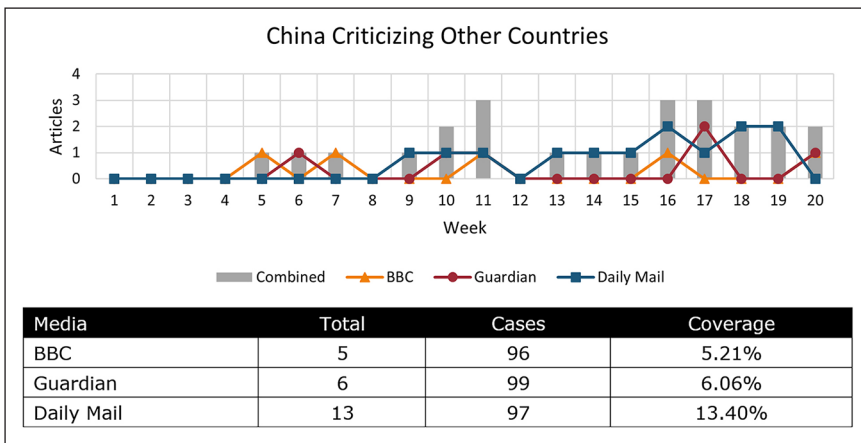


Figure 9. Chronological occurrence of theme: China criticizing other countries

below), followed by *the Guardian* (six), while *the Daily Mail* carries the most ‘vivid’, dramatic reports on China criticizing other countries, resulting in 13 instances (e.g. extract 14 below). While *the BBC* reported on China’s criticism towards the United States, *the Guardian* selected Australia as China’s target for criticism (e.g. extract 13 below), reflecting the diplomatic confrontation between the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and the Chinese ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, when calls for an inquiry into the origin of the virus became strongest from Australia:

Deteriorating Sino–US relations. As we have seen earlier, as the pandemic progressed, articles from all publications began to report a worsening in diplomatic relations between China and the United States (which had already been deteriorating under the Trump Administration). These peaked in

- (12) China accuses the United States of causing panic and ‘spreading fear’. The Chinese government has accused the United States of causing panic in its response to the deadly coronavirus outbreak (BBC, 3 February 2020).
- (13) China bristles at Australia’s call for investigation into coronavirus origin. Beijing warns relationship could be damaged ‘beyond repair’ after Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison cites ‘extraordinary’ impact of COVID-19 (Guardian, 29 April 2020).
- (14) China blasts Fox News host Jesse Watters’ ‘arrogance’, ‘prejudice’ and ‘ignorance’ after he demanded Beijing apologize over coronavirus outbreak. Jesse Watters made the comments half-jokingly on a talk show on Monday (Daily Mail, 5 March 2020).

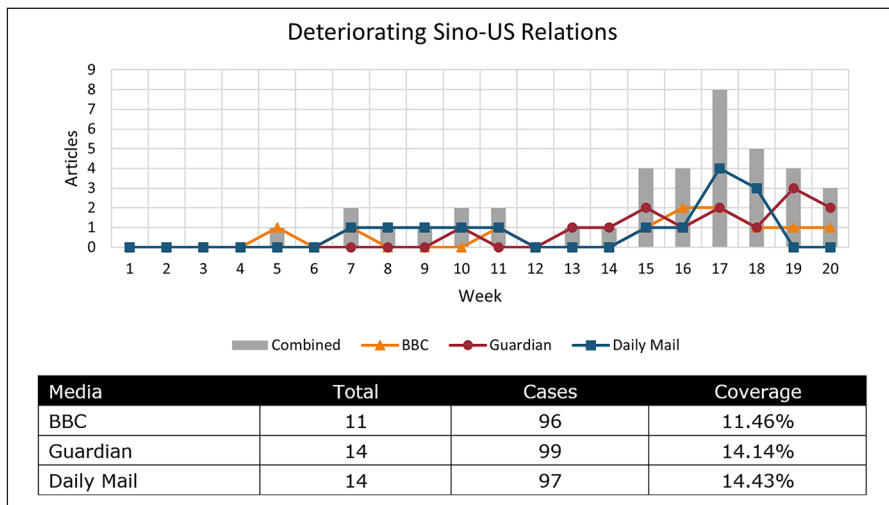


Figure 10. Chronological occurrence of theme: deteriorating Sino-US relations

week 17, following increasing support by Trump for the theory that the virus originated from a laboratory in Wuhan, and threats by the United States to sue China for economic damages as a result of the pandemic. This was also roughly the timeframe where suspicion of China’s figures on COVID-19 infection and death rates was circulating in media discourse, with accusations that China had covered up the true extent of infections and fatalities (see also forthcoming discussions on ‘Questioning China’s Truthfulness’ section below). The following extracts from the three media illustrate this sub-theme:

The above extracts show that the theme of ‘deteriorating relations between China and the US’ can be further divided into reports on (a) the United States attacking China and (b) China attacking the United States, as both sides sharpen their rhetoric on each other. As the graph below shows, the

- (15) Trump angers Beijing with ‘Chinese virus’ tweet. China has reacted angrily after US President Donald Trump referred to the coronavirus as ‘Chinese’ (BBC, 17 March 2020).
- (16) Trump says China wants him to lose re-election. The US President Donald Trump has said China ‘will do anything they can’ to make him lose his re-election bid, stepping up his criticism of Beijing amid the coronavirus pandemic (BBC, 30 April 2020).
- (17) China pushes propaganda casting doubt on virus origin. Diplomats, state media and officials in China encourage idea that COVID-19 came from the United States (Guardian, 12 March 2020).
- (18) On the light side, Trump casts doubt on China’s coronavirus figures. The US lawmakers accuse Beijing of under-reporting scale of outbreak (Guardian, 2 April 2020).
- (19) Rush Limbaugh claims the deadly coronavirus is being ‘weaponized’ by China to tank the US economy and bring down Donald Trump ‘but is no worse than the common cold’ (Daily Mail, 25 February 2020).
- (20) Chinese spokesman accuses the US military of bringing coronavirus to Wuhan as war of words escalates after Trump’s national security adviser accused Beijing of cover up. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said in a tweet that the United States lacked transparency around its handling of coronavirus (Daily Mail, 12 March 2020).

combined reports on the United States attacking China reached a climax in week 17, with *the Daily Mail* committing most space to it. The same is true for the sub-theme of ‘China attacking the US’: *the Daily Mail* reports the most on China’s criticism towards the United States. *The BBC* did not report on the criticism of China by the United States until week 16. However, it was the first one to report on China’s criticism of the United States, from week 5. *The Guardian* committed little space to the criticism coming from the United States towards China in the initial stage until week 13. It reported even less on China’s criticism of the United States.

Questioning China’s truthfulness. There are two important aspects which can be inferred from these figures. First, in spite of the differences exhibited in other themes, under the theme of ‘questioning China’s truthfulness’, the three media organizations are all found to question China by using

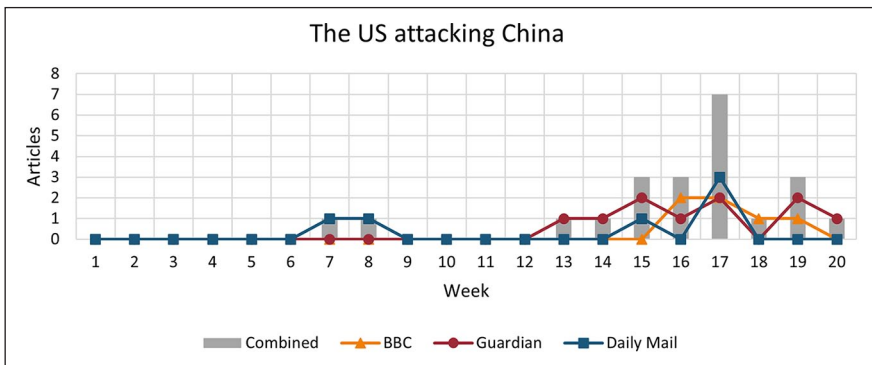


Figure 11. Chronological occurrence of theme: the US attacking China

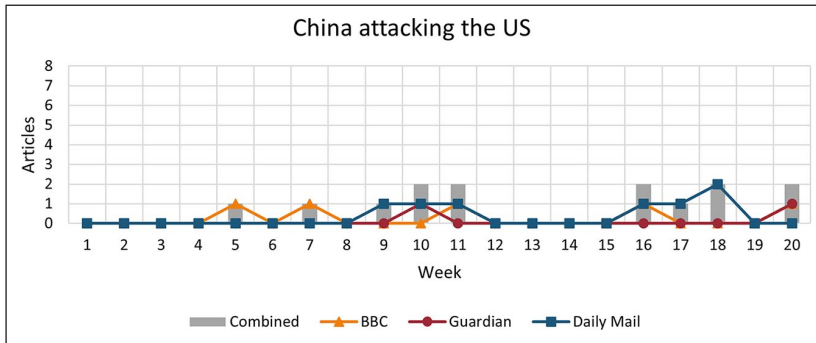


Figure 12. Chronological occurrence of theme: China attacking the US

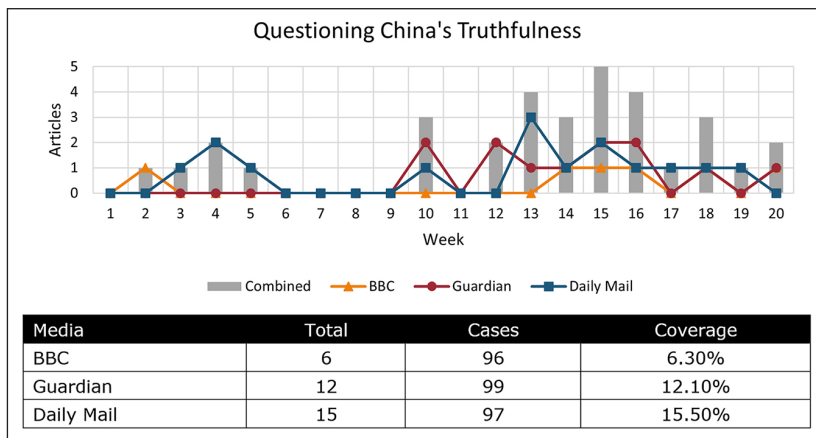


Figure 13. Chronological occurrence of theme: questioning China's truthfulness

rhetorical questions on its truthfulness, leading the readers to distrust the successful narratives coming from China on containing the virus. Second, what remains the same is the differences in the frequency: *the BBC* reports only 6 times, compared with 15 times by *the Daily Mail* and *the Guardian* reporting 12 times. Extracts from the following three media:

- (21) How bad are China's economic woes? While economists say China's economic data cannot always be trusted, they now have a new dilemma – there is no data (BBC, 22 May 2020).
- (22) Life after lockdown: has China really beaten coronavirus? Residents and analysts doubt the near-zero transmission rate as restrictions are eased (Guardian, 23 March 2020).
- (23) The great cover-up of China: Beijing punished COVID whistleblower, claimed it came from the United States and 'is STILL lying about death figures' – so what CAN we believe from them? Coronavirus is thought to have originated at market in Wuhan before spreading (Daily Mail, 31 March 2020).

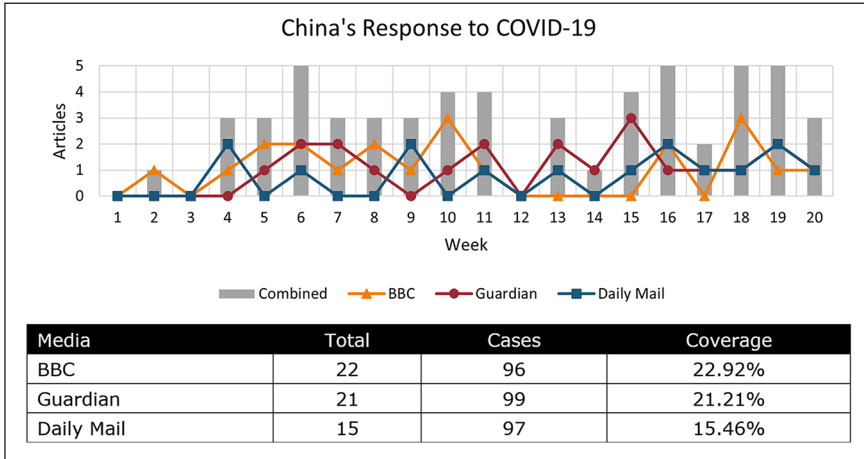


Figure 14. Chronological occurrence of theme: China’s response to COVID-19

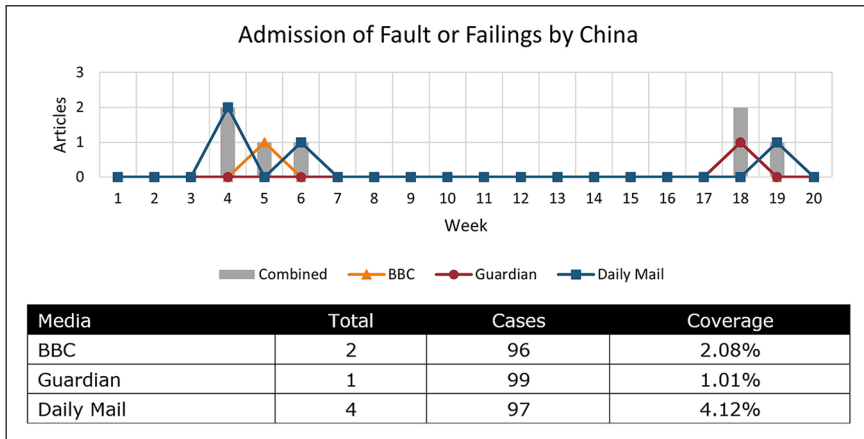


Figure 15. Chronological occurrence of theme: admission of fault or failings by China

China’s response to COVID-19

The second main theme in the data set is China’s response to COVID-19. The chart below includes articles which mention all official forms of response by China, including acknowledgement or repudiation of criticism, reactions to the domestic and international economic downturn, technological responses to COVID-19 and offers of international aid.

We selected three prominent sub-themes for closer examination: admission of error or fault, economic response or impact and response to criticism.

Admission of error or fault. The coverage of China’s admission of error or fault occurs between weeks 3 and 7, and weeks 17 and 20.

Examples:

- (24) China admits ‘shortcomings and deficiencies’. China’s top leadership has admitted shortcomings and deficiencies in the country’s response to the deadly coronavirus outbreak (BBC, 4 February 2020).
- (25) Chinese official admits health system weaknesses. The coronavirus pandemic is a ‘big test’ that has exposed weaknesses in China’s public health system, a senior official has told Chinese media (BBC, 9 May 2020).
- (7) China ADMITS it was too slow to react to coronavirus outbreak which has killed at least 213 people – amid claims that officials are hiding a higher death toll by cremating bodies. Secretary of ruling party in Wuhan admitted ‘remorse’ over the virus outbreak (Daily Mail, 31 January 2020).

Examples from all three media notably cite senior Chinese officials when it comes to China admitting its own errors in the initial management of the disease, as well as admitting its weakness in public health measures. Again, *the Daily Mail* is consistently sensational by capitalizing verbs for emphatic purposes. Both *the BBC* and *the Guardian* are restrained in their choice of language in their reports on this sub-theme.

Economic response or impact. As COVID-19 spread with alarming speed, infecting millions and bringing economic activity to a near standstill as countries imposed tight restrictions on movement to halt the spread of the virus, UK media started to report on the impact the pandemic was having on China’s economy, as well as reporting its efforts to revive the economy. *The BBC* offers most coverage of this sub-theme. *The Guardian* also reports on the impact of the outbreak on China’s economy and its response to recover its economy. However, it goes beyond into other areas to speculate what China could do with its debt hold over other countries, inferring that China might take control of other countries’ assets or forgive debt to boost its soft power. *The Daily Mail* does not report on this sub-theme.

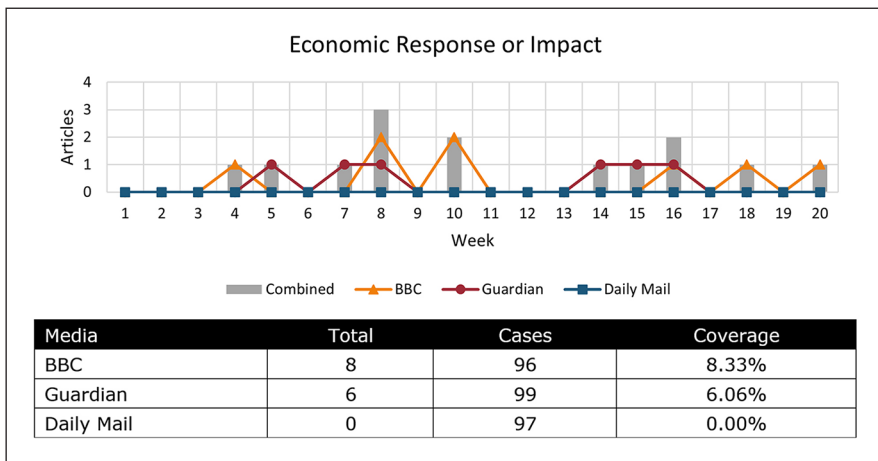


Figure 16. Chronological occurrence of theme: economic response or impact

- (26) China to pump billions into economy amid growth fears. China is to pump a net 150 billion yuan (US\$22 billion; £16.3 billion) into its economy on Monday to help protect it from the impact of the coronavirus outbreak (BBC, 2 February 2020).
- (21) How bad are China’s economic woes? While economists say China’s economic data cannot always be trusted, they now have a new dilemma—there is no data (BBC, 22 May 2020).
- (28) Could coronavirus be China’s Chernobyl moment? The coronavirus crisis engulfing China is the biggest political test yet for Xi Jinping. *The Guardian’s* Lily Kuo looks at how it may become an economic crisis (Guardian, 24 February 2020).
- (29) Coronavirus chaos could strengthen China’s debt hold on struggling nations. Beijing could either take control of other countries’ assets or forgive debt to boost its soft power, experts say, as economic fallout widens (Guardian, 11 April 2020).

Response to criticism. With calls from different countries demanding an international inquiry into the origins of the outbreak in Wuhan, China’s representatives around the world started to rebut such demand. China is represented in all three publications as ‘angry’, ‘furious’ and rejective of suspicions or insinuations regarding COVID-19’s origin. *The Guardian*, while reporting on China’s response to criticism, also uses the same lead to report the infection rates in other countries such as Brazil, thus reinforcing the link between the virus that was believed to originate from China and the impact it has had around the world (see extract 30 below).

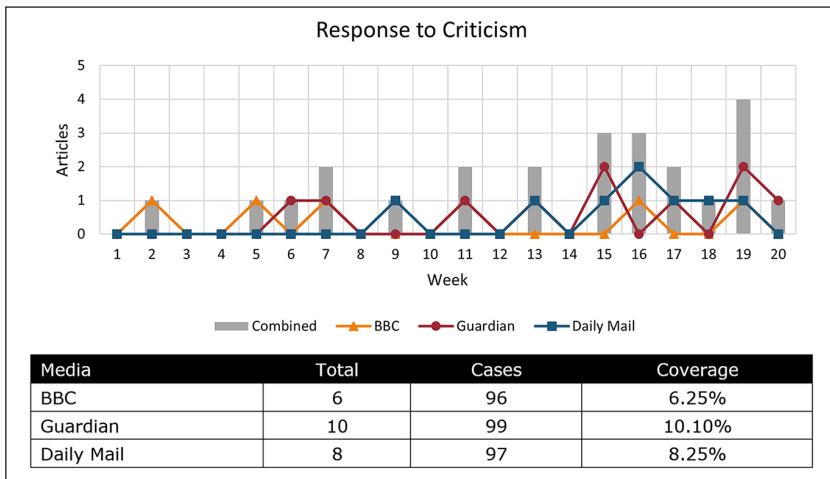


Figure 17. Chronological occurrence of theme: response to criticism

- (15) Trump angers Beijing with ‘Chinese virus’ tweet. China has reacted angrily after the US President Donald Trump referred to the coronavirus as ‘Chinese’ (BBC, 17 March 2020).
- (30) Global report: Trump threat to cut trade ties over COVID-19 branded ‘lunacy’ by Chinese media. President says he does not want to speak to counterpart Xi; Brazil passes 200,000 infections; Baltic travel ‘bubble’ begins (Guardian, 15 May 2020).

- (31) China furiously hits back at coronavirus cover-up claims with 11,000-word article quoting Lincoln after President Xi was accused of ‘personally asking the WHO to hold back information and delaying the global response by four to six WEEKS’. Chinese foreign ministry released a 30-page, 11,000 word article refuting claims (Daily Mail, 10 May 2020).

Praise for China’s COVID-19 handling

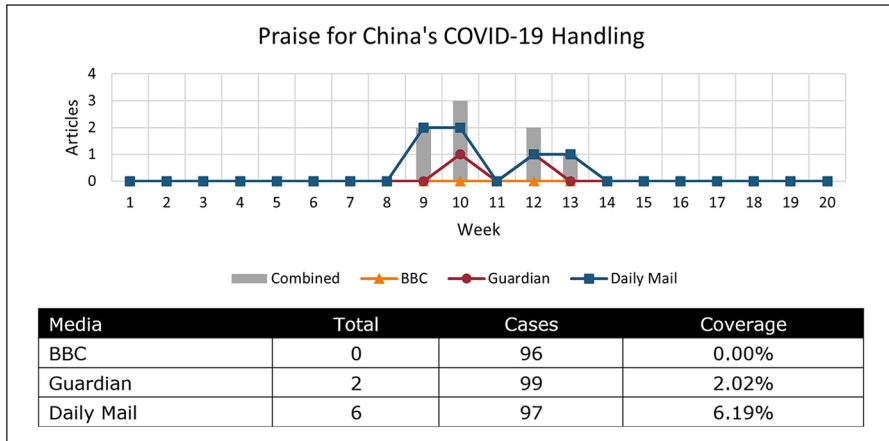


Figure 18. Chronological occurrence of theme: praise for China’s COVID-19 handling

Praise for China’s handling was very tempered. Although *the BBC* was the least critical in terms of the number of negative reports, positive reports were absent from *the BBC*’s coverage. Praise for China peaked in week 10 in *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail*, when it appeared that China’s infection rates were dropping. The articles primarily asked what the world could learn from China’s handling of coronavirus (see extracts 32 and 33). However, in most cases, acknowledgement of China’s success at controlling COVID-19 was made in tandem with general incredulity at the official infection/death figures, or with notions that it is China’s authoritarian political nature that allowed for draconian control measures to be quickly enforced, and therefore, are not replicable in democratic countries (extract 34):

- (32) How did China get to grips with its coronavirus outbreak? World is looking at Beijing to see what lessons can be learned as new cases of infections fall (Guardian, 9 March 2020).
- (33) What can we learn from China’s handling of coronavirus? After weeks of lockdown China is starting to lift restrictions in an attempt to return the country to normal. *The Guardian*’s Beijing bureau chief, Lily Kuo, discusses how China coped with coronavirus and what life is like there now (Guardian, 26 March 2020).
- (34) China was once the cradle of the coronavirus pandemic but it has bounced back with astonishing speed, writes EDWARD LUCAS as he reveals the country may have won the war for global supremacy as well. China’s cases of coronavirus have stagnated while Western countries suffer. Country’s regime used mandatory quarantine and other draconian measures (Daily Mail, 3 April 2020).

In sum, our thematic analysis shows that although the selected media are of different types in the United Kingdom, the themes and topics are not substantially different from each other. They all serve to inform and help the public keep abreast of the development of COVID-19. Our analysis shows general patterns among the three media and also specific patterns for individual media. As far as the general pattern is concerned, although the publications are of different types in terms of their ideology and target readership, it is noteworthy that from the beginning, all three present this infectious disease as a real danger and as a serious threat to not only public health but also to the global economy. This is especially so when the United Kingdom started to see an increase in domestic cases and began to take countermeasures.

However, apart from the general pattern of reporting coronavirus as a threat, there are different trends noted among the three media. *The BBC* was found to present the news in a more neutral way, as some of the examples have shown earlier, reporting the development under the identified themes as facts. It is found not to go to extremes – on the theme of ‘criticism of China’, for instance, it was found to be more controlled, and on the theme of ‘praise for China’s response’, it remained silent. *The BBC* frequently cited sources in order to impart credibility.

The popular tabloid, *the Daily Mail*, did not engage with overtly politically oriented news, but paid more attention to what was happening at the social level. On one hand, because it is more society-oriented, it provided more details of a story and packaged it in a more sensational way. On the other hand, because it did not support its reports with credible sources in the way *the BBC* did, it gave one the impression that much of the information was based on opinion, guesswork and preliminary results, rather than accurate and professional information.

Finally, *the Guardian* sits somewhere in between *the Daily Mail* and *the BBC* in terms of emotion and tone in the sentiment analysis. In the thematic analysis, while it worked with the same topics as the other two, *the Guardian* is shown to have emphasized human rights issues in relation to the handling of COVID-19 in China.

Conclusion

Our sentiment analysis and thematic analysis have both shown tendencies, some in common and some differently, on the coverage of the outbreak of the pandemic in China and China’s handling of the public health issue.

What does the sentiment analysis tell us? What do the general and specific patterns in the three chosen media we find in the themes imply? According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies and their governments. There is no doubt that on a public health issue of a global scale, the UK media all tried to achieve the primary goal of journalism by providing information on the virus. Following Montgomery’s (2007) statement that the potential power of media discourse is the bridge between the audience and the depiction of reality, we can infer the following: the general media-consuming public in the United Kingdom would regard China’s handling of the virus as largely negative or neutral. Readers of *the BBC*, however, would hold a more balanced or neutral view of China, while nearly half of *the Guardian* readers would hold a neutral view of China. However, of the remaining half, more Guardian readers would hold a negative view of China than BBC readers. More than half of the readers of *the Daily Mail* may form a negative view of China. Following Sparks’ (2010) statement that *the Daily Mail* has a readership profile quite close to the national norm, we can infer here that *the Daily Mail*’s sentiment could be what to expect from UK citizens towards China in this matter.

The general patterns in the themes regarding the handling of coronavirus in China in our data set – commencing with fear for the first 5 weeks, moving to praise for a couple of weeks, then concluding in accusations for about 7 weeks – imply the kind of feelings the UK media-consuming public experienced from reading the selected media. In that sense, the traditional difference between the broadsheet *Guardian* and the tabloid *Daily Mail*, left or right, and the public service provider *BBC*, is becoming blurred. This can be partially explained by the general political climate (anti-foreign etc) in the United Kingdom as mentioned in the introduction, which influences the way in which public opinion engages with China, and how media organizations subsequently craft their stories to appeal to their target audiences.

However, the different patterns observed in the individual media also tempt us to believe that those differences must also be reflected in the perceptions of China held by their readers. In the context of this study, we have thus demonstrated that the relatively well-off and well-educated readers of the ‘quality’ media (here *the Guardian* and *the BBC*) access more reasonable and balanced reports on the virus and China’s handling, whereas the comparatively lower education/income level readers of the tabloid (*the Daily Mail*) access reports that are more sensational, but which demonstrate less political focus than the reports of *the Guardian*.

To conclude, the selected UK media, which target different readerships in the United Kingdom with differing political and social outlooks, do not exhibit significant differences in the themes through which they have represented China when dealing with the same health issue. However, the ways of discussing and presenting those topics were subject to variation between the publications, which in turn is reflected in the attitudes and perceptions of their readers.

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Notes

1. These are dissimilar terms, and therefore, cannot be added together.
2. www.bbc.co.uk/news; www.theguardian.com; www.dailymail.co.uk

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