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Framing the Chinese Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Analysis of BBC and CNN's Digital Video News Coverage

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Abstract

This study examines how BBC and CNN portrayed the Chinese government in COVID-19 digital video news. Using quantitative content analysis, 724 videos published between December 2019 and December 2020 (BBC = 189; CNN = 535) were coded for tone (positive/neutral/negative) and five generic news frames (responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality). Two trained coders double-coded 20% of the sample (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.85$). Results show that both outlets overwhelmingly relied on the responsibility frame (BBC: 91.5%; CNN: 90.4%). BBC used human-interest framing more frequently (41.1%) than CNN (6.5%), whereas CNN employed economic consequences framing more often (9.5%). Tone was predominantly neutral in both outlets (BBC: 69.84%; CNN: 73.46%), with moderate negative coverage and minimal positive portrayals. A chi-square test indicated no significant difference in tone distribution between BBC and CNN ($\chi^2(2, N = 724) = 2.290$, $p = .318$). The findings suggest convergent accountability-centered framing of China's pandemic response in Western digital video news.

Keywords: media framing, Chinese government, tone, news media, BBC, CNN, digital video journalism

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic not only triggered a global public health emergency but also catalyzed an unprecedented wave of media discourse that shaped international perceptions of national governance. In a hyper-connected digital environment, international media such as the BBC and CNN serve as key intermediaries in framing how global audiences interpret the actions of governments during crises (Chon & Kim, 2022, Agostino et al., 2021). By selecting which aspects of events to highlight, emphasizing certain narratives, and employing specific evaluative tones, these media outlets construct mental images that influence public opinion and, ultimately, international relations (Godsey et al., 2020, Merino et al., 2024).

Research on international media coverage of health crises suggests that framing and tone are key mechanisms that influence audience interpretation Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Frames determine which aspects of an event are emphasized, such as responsibility, conflict, or human interest while tone conveys evaluative judgments, signaling neutrality, criticism, or approval. Existing studies on Western media portrayals of China often highlight negative or critical frames, especially during crises involving public health, trade, or diplomacy (Ittefaq et al., 2022). However, little is known about how BBC and CNN, as two of the most prominent Western news outlets, framed and evaluated the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in digital news formats where tone and narrative structures can directly influence global audiences.

Western media narratives about China have historically oscillated between cautious engagement and overt skepticism, often portraying the Chinese government as authoritarian, opaque, and ideologically divergent from liberal democratic norms (Edel & Shullman, 2021, Vese, 2022). Events such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the Xinjiang human rights controversy, and the 2019 Hong Kong protests have repeatedly been framed through a lens of political repression and censorship (Purbrick, 2019, Szadziewski, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis intensified this representational pattern, with early coverage foregrounding alleged delays in reporting the outbreak, the suppression of whistleblowers, and stringent lockdowns (Jia & Lu, 2021). As surveys indicate, this negative framing contributed to record-high unfavorable perceptions of China in Western countries, with 74% in the UK and 81% in Australia expressing negative views by mid-2020 (Silver et al., 2020).

Digital video journalism has amplified the global reach and emotional resonance of these narratives. Unlike traditional text-based reporting, video-based digital news integrates visual, auditory, and narrative elements, such as camera angles, editing sequences, and voiceover tone to construct meaning and influence audience sentiment (Walker, 2021). BBC and CNN's digital platforms, with extensive international audiences, deploy such multimodal framing techniques to communicate crisis narratives rapidly and persuasively. Yet, empirical research on how these outlets frame and evaluate the Chinese government in digital video news remains limited, despite its critical role in shaping public opinion and geopolitical discourse (Maher, 2023, Safa & Barati, 2024).

To address this gap, the present study focuses on two central dimensions of media representation: dominant frames and tone of coverage. Drawing upon Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) five-frame typology, we analyze 189 BBC and 535 CNN digital video news items published between December 2019 and December 2020. We categorize the evaluative tone into positive, neutral, and negative to identify not only how events were framed but also how the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 was judged in the international media arena.

By examining the media narratives constructed by BBC and CNN, this research contributes to our understanding of international news framing, media tone in crisis reporting, and the role of Western media in shaping global perceptions of China. These insights are particularly salient in the context of increasing geopolitical tensions and the growing significance of media diplomacy during global health emergencies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Media and News Dissemination

The digital transformation of global media has redefined how audiences engage with news, altering not only consumption patterns but also the very nature of journalistic storytelling. Scholars note that the shift from traditional print and broadcast formats to digital, multi-platform journalism has introduced real-time updates, multimedia integration, and participatory affordances (Alzubi, 2023, Marciano et al., 2022). Within this landscape, global outlets like the BBC and CNN have become pivotal in shaping international discourse, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic by leveraging their reach across websites, mobile apps, and social media.

Critically, digital news dissemination transcends technological change; it reflects a reconfiguration of journalism's narrative and affective power. By combining video, audio, and text, online news constructs stories that are simultaneously informative, emotionally resonant, and visually immersive (Walker, 2021). Such techniques amplify journalism's capacity to frame public understanding, raising questions about how digital formats influence perceptions of institutions like the Chinese government. Here, this study analyzes three interconnected aspects: (1) the evolution of global news, (2) the BBC's and CNN's roles as global digital news leaders, and (3) the framing and narrative construction about digital video news.

2.1.1 The Transformation of Global News in the Digital Era

In this context, digital video journalism became the dominant mode of communication for international news outlets, enabling real-time updates paired with multimodal framing techniques (Walker, 2021, Marciano et al., 2022).

During the early months of the pandemic (December 2019–March 2020), both BBC and CNN shifted their reporting to digital-first strategies, relying heavily on short video segments, live-streamed press conferences, and interactive news explainers to construct narratives about the Chinese government. For instance, BBC produced a series of two-minute explainers showing drone footage of deserted Wuhan streets, animations of virus transmission, and clips of Chinese medical teams, combining visual evidence with a neutral voiceover to emphasize the scale and severity of the outbreak. In contrast, CNN frequently opened video segments with clips of the Li Wenliang whistleblower story, international health experts' interviews, and footage of U.S. political reactions, foregrounding conflict and accountability frames , Zhang, 2023).

Digital media affordances enabled both outlets to curate narratives in near real-time, but their editorial emphasis diverged in subtle ways. BBC's online news often framed China's response through responsibility and human-interest frames, highlighting strict lockdowns and the experience of Chinese citizens. For example, BBC video packages routinely juxtaposed official government briefings with personal stories of Wuhan residents, presenting China as simultaneously controlling and resilient. Conversely, CNN's digital output displayed a stronger tendency toward conflict and morality frames, emphasizing China's information transparency issues, early reporting delays, and geopolitical tensions with the United States and the World Health Organization (Vese, 2022, Safa & Barati, 2024).

What distinguishes this digital-era transformation from traditional broadcast reporting is the integration of visual, textual, and affective elements into cohesive narrative packages that circulate transnationally. Each 2–3 minute video clip could contain on-screen infection maps, voiceover analysis, and direct footage from Chinese cities, providing audiences not just with information, but with a curated interpretive frame. These narratives were then amplified across

YouTube and Facebook, ensuring global reach within hours of production Pollock & Vakoch, 2021). As a result, digital video coverage of China's pandemic response did not merely document events; it actively shaped the interpretive environment in which China's international image was contested.

This specificity demonstrates how the digital transformation of journalism produces immediate geopolitical effects, particularly when covering non-Western governments in times of crisis. For China, the frames and tones embedded in BBC and CNN digital reporting significantly influenced international discourses on transparency, governance, and global responsibility during COVID-19.

2.1.2 BBC and CNN as Global Digital News Leaders

In the evolving landscape of digital journalism, BBC News Online and CNN.com have emerged as dominant actors, leveraging their global reach, institutional credibility, and adaptability to platform-driven news consumption (Li et al., 2018, Sichani & Hendy, 2021). Their distinct editorial identities the BBC's public service ethos of impartiality versus CNN's commercially oriented, U.S.-anchored globalism shape not only their reporting priorities but also how they engage transnational audiences. Crucially, both organizations have adopted digital-first strategies, optimizing content for websites, mobile apps, and social media platforms Pollock & Vakoch, 2021). Yet, as this section argues, their influence extends beyond mere distribution: it is amplified by algorithmic logics and affordances that privilege certain narratives over others (Maher, 2023).

Digital video journalism encompassing short-form clips, live streams, and documentary-style reports has become a cornerstone of their global appeal. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, BBC and CNN coverage of China's lockdowns and public health policies circulated transnationally, their visibility intensified by platform algorithms favoring emotionally charged or visually arresting content (Jia & Lu, 2021). This dynamic illustrates a key tension: while such reporting informs global publics, it also participates in constructing the discursive frameworks through which institutions and governments interpret China's actions (Zhang, 2023). The platforms' role is not neutral; as Maher (2023) demonstrates, algorithmic prioritization of conflict or spectacle can distort the representation of complex events, with real-world diplomatic and public opinion consequences.

2.2 Media Framing

2.2.1 Semetko and Valkenburg Concept of Media Framing

Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) framing theory highlights the influential role of news framing in shaping audience perception, comprehension, and memory. Frames, such as conflict, human interest, responsibility, economic consequences, and morality direct the audience's focus and emotional responses, thereby influencing how issues are understood. These frames guide cognitive and emotional reactions, with different frames eliciting varying responses, such as empathy for human interest or a heightened sense of dispute for conflict frames (Linström & Marais, 2012).

The theory also underscores the impact of framing on news recall and understanding, with certain frames enhancing or impeding memory. For example, responsibility frames may focus attention on accountability, while conflict frames highlight disputes (An & Gower, 2009). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)'s empirical work, employing experimental methodologies, provides strong evidence for framing's effect on public opinion and societal attitudes toward political, social, and economic issues.

Framing theory has had broad implications, influencing research in political communication, media bias, and agenda-setting, and it has practical applications in media literacy, urging critical engagement with news content (Potter, 2014). However, critics argue that framing effects can vary based on audience characteristics, necessitating a more nuanced approach (Price et al., 1997). The rise of digital media also presents challenges in adapting the theory to new media landscapes (Chadwick, 2017).

Despite these challenges, framing theory remains foundational in understanding media influence. Its application in analyzing media portrayals, such as the coverage of the Chinese government during the COVID-19 crisis, demonstrates how frames shape public perceptions of political and international issues (Scheufele 1999). Overall, Valkenburg and Semetko's work continues to be a crucial tool for analyzing how media structures narratives and influences public opinion.

2.2.2 Framing and Narrative Construction in Digital Video News

The framing of political actors in digital video journalism extends far beyond textual reporting; it is an embodied practice where meaning is constructed through the interplay of visual composition, auditory cues, and editorial rhythm (Coman et al., 2021; Mutua & Oloo, 2020, Chen, 2024). Unlike traditional news formats, digital video leverages multimodal storytelling camera angles that simulate intimacy or distance, color grading that evokes urgency or neutrality, soundtracks that amplify tension to guide audience interpretation in ways that are often implicit yet

systematic (Deacon, 2007). For example, during COVID-19 coverage, outlets like the BBC and CNN recurrently deployed accountability and conflict frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), visualizing them through drone footage of deserted Wuhan streets (symbolizing state-enforced isolation) or tight close-ups of masked citizens (implying collective vulnerability). These techniques did not merely report events; they performed a narrative of authoritarian control and global discord.

Critically, such framing aligns with documented Western media tendencies to portray non-democratic states through lenses of opacity and moral divergence (Vese, 2022, Safa & Barati, 2024). Yet digital platforms also introduce contingencies: human-interest segments showcasing hospital construction or recovered patients often amplified by social media algorithms favoring "positive" engagement could momentarily disrupt dominant narratives (Zayani, 2021). This tension reveals how editorial intent negotiates with platform logics : even critical coverage becomes layered, as affordances like autoplay or recommended videos prioritize emotionally resonant snippets over contextual depth. By dissecting these choices, we interrogate how digital video's sensory immediacy legitimizes certain political realities while marginalizing others.

Building on the conceptual understanding of digital media and its framing capacity, this study investigates how BBC and CNN portrayed the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it addresses two research questions (as shown in figure 1):

RQ1: What are the dominant frames utilized by BBC and CNN outlets to inform the public about China's actions and policies in general?

RQ2: What is the tone used by BBC and CNN in portraying the Chinese government's actions and responses to the COVID-19 crisis?

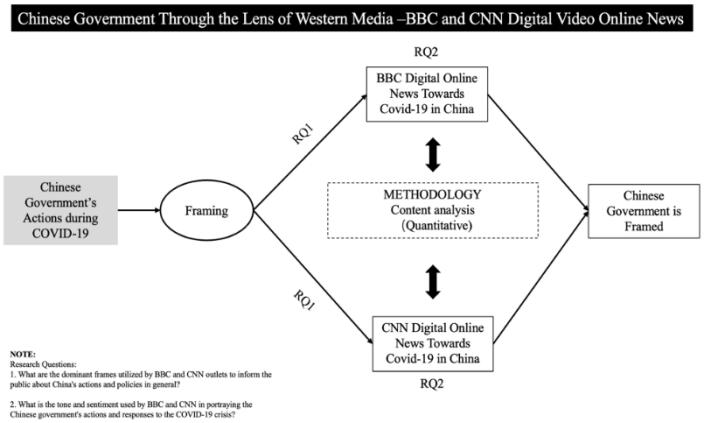


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Methods

3.1 Selection of Sites and Data Analysis

This study employs a quantitative content analysis of digital video news produced by BBC and CNN, with a focus on the portrayal of the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative content analysis was chosen for its ability to systematically identify patterns in media content and to measure frequencies and distributions of frames and tones across a large dataset (Neuendorf, 2017, Krippendorff, 1980). BBC and CNN were selected due to their global influence, extensive digital video output, and credibility as international news sources, which allow them to function as key agenda-setters in the global media ecosystem (Li et al., 2018, Sichani & Hendy, 2021). Both outlets have increasingly adopted digital-first strategies, distributing video content through their websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms, facilitating the rapid and transnational circulation of their coverage (Maher, 2023; Pollock & Vakoch, 2021).

The dataset consists of 724 digital video news items 189 from BBC and 535 from CNN published between December 2019 and December 2020, the period encompassing the emergence and global escalation of COVID-19. Videos were included based on three selection criteria. First, they had to demonstrate direct topical relevance, explicitly addressing COVID-19 in relation to the Chinese government's actions, policies, or interactions with international actors. Second, they had to fall within the defined temporal scope, capturing the progression of the pandemic from its initial outbreak in Wuhan to its recognition as a global health crisis. Third, they were required to be accessible via official digital platforms, ensuring that the content was intended for international audiences. Each video served as a unit of analysis, and its title, description, and audiovisual content were archived and examined.

To systematically evaluate the tone and framing of the videos, a deductive coding framework was applied. Tone was coded according to a threefold schema, classifying each video as positive, neutral, or negative toward the Chinese government. Positive tone included content highlighting China's effective pandemic management, successful public health measures, or contributions to global cooperation. Neutral tone referred to factual, descriptive reporting without explicit evaluative judgment. Negative tone encompassed coverage emphasizing delays, lack of transparency, suppression of information, or international criticism (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In addition to tone, each video was coded for the presence of five established media frames, Responsibility, Conflict, Human Interest, Economic Consequences, and Morality following the framework developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). A binary coding approach was employed for frame detection (1 = present; 0 = absent), allowing for multiple frames to be assigned to a single video when appropriate, as shown in figure 2.

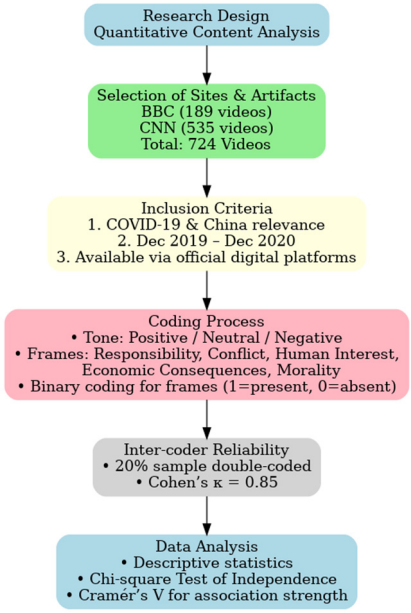


Figure 2. Research Design Blueprint

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, as shown in figure 3, two trained coders independently coded a randomly selected 20% sample of the dataset. Inter-coder reliability was evaluated using Cohen's kappa, with a value of $\kappa = 0.85$, exceeding the 0.80 threshold recommended for robust quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. After finalizing the coding, all 724 videos were coded and tabulated for statistical analysis.

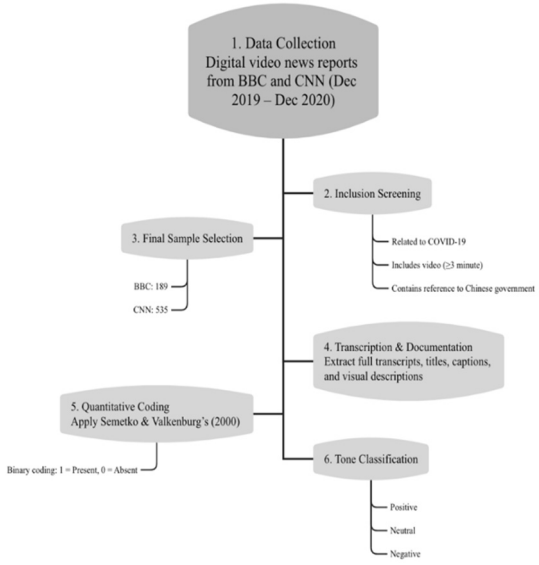


Figure 3. Research Coding Process

The quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS 28.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were calculated to determine the distribution of tone and frames across BBC and CNN. A Chi-square test of independence was performed to assess whether the tone distribution differed significantly between the two outlets, and Cramér's V was used to measure the strength of association. These analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of how BBC and CNN framed the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing for the identification of dominant tone patterns and narrative frames in international digital video news.

3.2 Reliability Test

To maintain consistency in data collection, it is essential to adopt an appropriate approach for evaluating the level of agreement among data coders. This agreement, referred to as intercoder reliability, can be quantified using statistical measures such as Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1968). Reliability in coding can be categorized into two forms: inter-coder reliability, which measures the agreement between multiple coders, and intra-coder reliability, which assesses the consistency of a single coder over time. Although Cohen's Kappa (κ) can evaluate both types, the present study emphasizes intercoder reliability, focusing on the degree of agreement between independent coders.

Table 1. Reliability Score for Cohen's Kappa (k)

Frames	Reliability Score Using Cohen's Kappa
Responsibility	.827
Economic Consequences	.819
Conflict	.853
Human Interest	.825
Morality	.814

The reliability assessment was conducted for every frame across all digital online video news analyzed. For each news item, 50 frames were randomly selected and coded according to the framework developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which consists of 20 dichotomous questions with responses coded as "YES" (1) or "NO" (0). As shown in table 1, the analysis produced a minimum Cohen's Kappa score of 0.814 for all variables, confirming that the coding achieved an acceptable level of reliability.

4. Findings

This study explores how the Chinese government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was portrayed in the digital video news of two leading Western media outlets, BBC and CNN. The analysis adopts the five-frame typology of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which includes responsibility, conflict, morality, economic consequences, and human interest frames. Each of these frames provides a unique perspective for interpreting political events and crises, shaping public perceptions of foreign governments and their actions. By examining the occurrence and distribution of these frames in 726 coded news items, 190 from BBC and 536 from CNN, this section reveals the dominant framing patterns that characterized China's representation on both platforms.

4.1 RQ1: What Are the Dominant Frames Utilized by BBC and CNN Outlets to Inform the Public about China's Actions and Policies in General?

BBC Outlets

The responsibility frame emerged as the most dominant, appearing in 173 news items, which accounted for roughly 91.5% of the BBC coverage, as shown in table 2. This frame emphasizes assigning accountability to particular actors here, the Chinese government for the management or mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. In the BBC's reporting, this frame frequently underscored the Chinese authorities' delayed reaction to the initial Wuhan outbreak, referencing the censorship of early alerts, suppression of whistleblowers, and insufficient transparency in sharing health data with global organizations.

Several reports highlighted China's influence on the global progression of the pandemic, citing its strict lockdowns, control over scientific information, and interactions with the World Health Organization (WHO). The BBC often contrasted China's centralized governance with democratic models, drawing attention to the tension between state authority and individual freedoms. As a result, the responsibility frame served as a critical lens through which the BBC questioned China's institutional competence and transparency, reflecting a broader Western media narrative that scrutinizes authoritarian political systems (Entman, 2007).

Moreover, this framing extended beyond China's domestic pandemic management to its international conduct, encompassing topics such as "vaccine diplomacy," information control, and geopolitical maneuvering. By linking China to both internal outcomes and global consequences of the pandemic, the BBC portrayed the country as a pivotal yet contentious actor in the worldwide crisis simultaneously powerful and problematic.

Table 2. BBC News Frame Proportion

Frames	News Items	Proportion
Responsibility	173	91.5%
Economic Consequences	35	18.9%
Conflict	14	7.3%
Human Interest	77	41.1%
Morality	36	19.5%

The human interest frame emerged as the second most frequently employed, appearing in 77 news items, or about 41.1% of the BBC's coverage. This frame humanizes the pandemic narrative by emphasizing personal experiences and emotional stories, aiming to elicit empathy and create a connection with viewers. The BBC applied this frame to showcase the voices of Chinese citizens under lockdown, frontline medical workers, and international observers affected by China's pandemic measures.

In contrast to the responsibility frame, which focused on institutional actions, the human interest frame highlighted the daily struggles and emotional dimensions of the crisis. For instance, coverage of separated families, overcrowded hospitals, and citizens expressing concerns about censorship lent the reporting a more intimate and relatable tone. These stories served a dual purpose: they engaged audiences emotionally while subtly reinforcing broader critiques of governance and state control.

Notably, even within human interest narratives, the BBC frequently intertwined personal stories with political commentary. Emotional accounts were often used to illustrate the tangible, lived effects of policy decisions, particularly within the context of authoritarian governance, demonstrating that emotional and political framings can complement rather than exclude each other

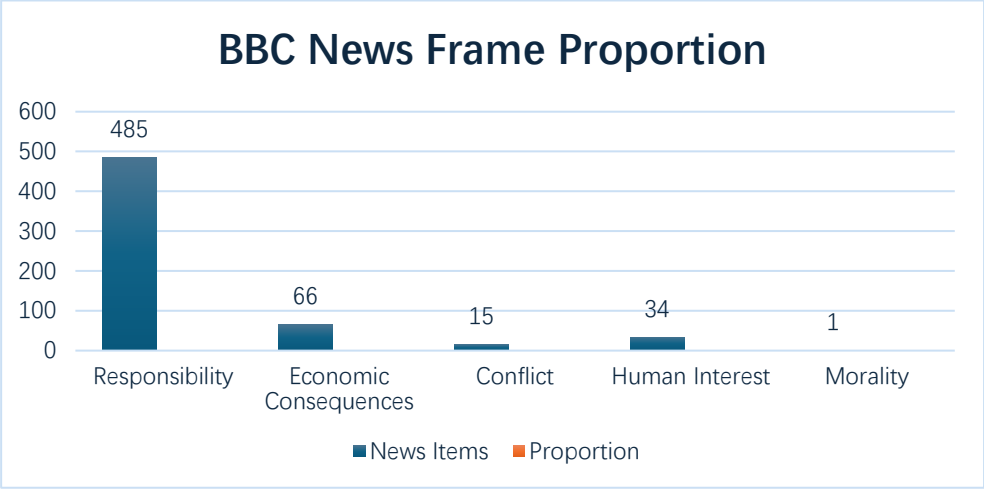


Figure 4. BBC News Frame Proportion

The conflict frame was the least frequently employed, appearing in only 14 cases (7.3%). When utilized, this frame primarily highlighted diplomatic frictions between China and other countries, most notably the United States. Coverage occasionally framed issues such as the virus's origin, international criticism of China, and disputes over global investigations as manifestations of geopolitical rivalry.

Despite the heightened U.S.–China tensions and political polarization during the pandemic, the BBC rarely foregrounded open confrontation in its reporting. This tendency may reflect an editorial preference for emphasizing governance and accountability rather than direct antagonism, as well as an institutional inclination to avoid framing a global health emergency in ways that could unnecessarily intensify international conflict.

Overall, the analysis indicates that the BBC's digital video coverage of China's pandemic response was predominantly shaped by the responsibility frame, complemented by human interest and morality frames. Economic and conflict frames appeared less frequently, serving a secondary role in the narrative. This framing pattern suggests a deliberate editorial strategy focused on holding authorities accountable, highlighting ethical governance, and illustrating the personal consequences of political decisions.

Such an approach aligns with the BBC's identity as a public service broadcaster committed to democratic values, transparency, and public responsibility. By centering governance scrutiny while incorporating humanizing narratives,

the BBC produced a nuanced yet critical portrayal of China one that informs, critiques, and emotionally resonates with its audience. These findings contribute to broader discussions on how Western media frame international crises and influence global perceptions of non-Western states.

CNN Outlets

The analysis showed that CNN predominantly relied on the responsibility frame in depicting the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19. This frame appeared in 485 of the 535 coded news items, representing roughly 90.4% of the total coverage, as show in table 3. Such a high frequency reflects a strong editorial focus on attributing accountability whether stated directly or implied for the management of the pandemic.

CNN's use of the responsibility frame was layered and nuanced. Numerous reports linked the virus's origin and its subsequent global spread to delays in the Chinese government's actions, frequently citing early censorship, suppression of whistleblowers, and the failure to promptly inform the international community. A recurring example was the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who sought to warn others about the emerging outbreak but was reprimanded by local authorities. CNN's framing of his story repeatedly emphasized institutional suppression and a lack of transparency, reinforcing narratives of governmental responsibility and culpability

Table 3. CNN News Frame Proportion

Frames	News Items	Proportion
Responsibility	485	90.4%
Economic Consequences	66	9.5%
Conflict	15	2.98%
Human Interest	34	6.5%
Morality	1	0.37%

The economic consequences frame emerged as the second most frequently used, appearing in 66 news items, or roughly 9.5% of CNN's coverage. This frame primarily underscored the concrete economic impacts of China's pandemic policies on both domestic and global levels. Reports often focused on supply chain disruptions, the shutdown of factories in major Chinese manufacturing hubs, declining consumer demand, and volatility in international stock markets.

In applying this frame, CNN did not present China as the sole source of economic disruption but rather as a pivotal actor within interconnected global systems, where its actions or lack thereof produced ripple effects across trade and finance. This approach offered a more nuanced narrative: while the Chinese government was frequently portrayed as accountable for critical shortcomings, its indispensable role in the global economy was simultaneously recognized, reflecting the complex interdependence of contemporary geopolitics.

Several reports also highlighted vulnerabilities in Western economies exposed by the crisis, including heavy reliance on Chinese imports for pharmaceuticals and personal protective equipment (PPE). While such discussions implied a need for policy reconsideration in the West, the framing ultimately reinforced the responsibility frame indirectly, as these economic shocks were consistently traced back to the Chinese government's delayed containment measures.

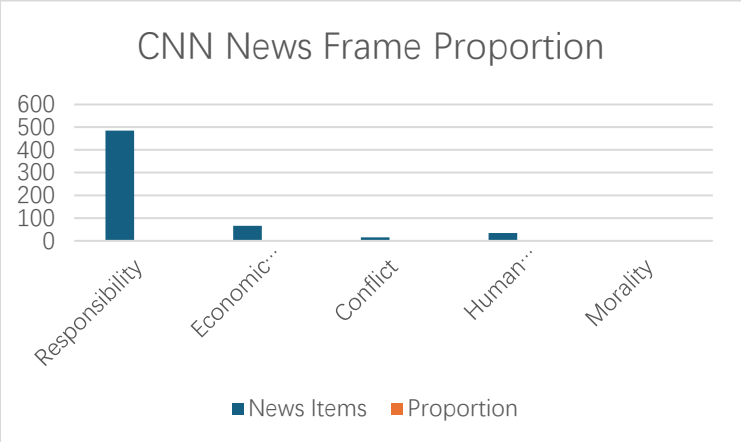


Figure 5. CNN News Frame Proportion

The conflict frame was minimally present, appearing in just 15 news items (2.98%). When applied, it primarily highlighted geopolitical frictions, including U.S.–China disputes, tensions with the World Health Organization, and criticism from other foreign governments, rather than internal political or social conflicts within China. This limited use

indicates that CNN's coverage prioritized systemic accountability and outcome-oriented critique over dramatizing direct confrontations.

The morality frame was almost absent, appearing only once (0.37%), making it the least utilized frame. This aligns with prior studies suggesting that mainstream Western media generally avoid explicit moralizing unless reporting on widely recognized ethical violations (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, moral undertones often appeared indirectly within other frames, especially responsibility and human interest, even if not explicitly coded as morality.

Overall, CNN's digital video coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic was overwhelmingly dominated by the responsibility frame, constructing a narrative centered on state accountability, mismanagement, and lack of transparency. This dominant framing was supplemented though far less frequently by economic consequence and human interest narratives, with limited attention to overt conflict or moral evaluation.

The frame distribution reflects an editorial emphasis on assessing state performance in the context of a global crisis, consistent with broader Western media practices of critically examining non-democratic governance under international scrutiny. In doing so, CNN's framing not only shaped public interpretations of China's pandemic response but also influenced global perceptions of Chinese governance in the post-pandemic landscape.

4.2 RQ2: What Is the Tone Used by BBC and CNN in Portraying the Chinese Government's Actions and Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis?

As shown in Table 4, the neutral tone dominated BBC's coverage, with 132 instances accounting for 69.84% of the analyzed news items. In this context, neutrality reflects a fact-driven style of reporting that avoids emotionally charged or explicitly evaluative language. Such coverage indicates an effort by BBC to maintain journalistic objectivity in reporting on China's pandemic response, particularly in stories detailing case numbers, public health measures, or international coordination. Neutral reports typically described lockdown protocols, containment efforts, or global reactions to the virus without imposing moral or political judgment.

Despite this overarching neutrality, a substantial portion of the coverage adopted a negative tone. 52 news items (27.5%) conveyed critical sentiment, often highlighting China's delayed initial response, lack of information transparency, or strained diplomatic relations during the outbreak. Terms like "censorship," "delayed response," and "concealing the outbreak" were frequent indicators of this tone, reflecting BBC's tendency to scrutinize state-led crisis management and public communication, particularly when addressing a geopolitically significant non-Western power.

Conversely, positive tone appeared in only 5 items (2.65%), making it exceedingly rare. These few reports focused on successful containment in certain provinces, scientific cooperation with international institutions, or China's humanitarian assistance to other countries. The scarcity of positive coverage suggests a limited emphasis on favorable narratives regarding China's pandemic strategy, consistent with previous research showing that Western media rarely foreground positive portrayals of China during crises (Sing Bik Ngai et al., 2022).

Overall, the tone distribution indicates a nuanced but largely critical editorial stance. While BBC did not overwhelmingly depict China negatively, its selective focus on contentious aspects of the response fosters a climate of cautious skepticism. Drawing on Entman's (2010) framing theory, this approach subtly guides audience interpretation by prioritizing certain problem definitions and evaluations.

The implications for international public opinion are notable: since media tone influences audience perceptions, the underrepresentation of positive narratives may lead viewers to adopt predominantly critical perspectives on China's COVID-19 management, even within ostensibly neutral reporting. From a framing perspective, even "neutral" stories can embed ideological signals through inclusion and omission patterns (D'angelo, 2002).

Table 4. The Tone of BBC News

Frames	News Items	Proportion
Positive	5	2.65%
Neutral	132	69.84%
Negative	52	27.51%

In sum, the tone analysis of BBC's digital video news on China's COVID-19 response reveals a complex tonal landscape: neutrality dominates, negative tone is significant, and positive tone is nearly absent. This pattern reflects a moderated critique rather than balanced endorsement, aligning with broader trends in Western media discourse toward non-Western governments and carrying potential implications for global perception and diplomacy during health crises.

As presented in Table 4, neutral tone dominated CNN's coverage, with 393 items accounting for 73.46% of the total. This indicates that most CNN reports adhered to a fact-driven and ostensibly impartial style, frequently focusing on statistical updates, official announcements, public health measures, and policy timelines without overt evaluative

language. Such an approach aligns with conventional journalistic norms emphasizing objectivity, particularly during the technical or early phases of pandemic reporting.

However, CNN's coverage also featured a notable share of negative tone, with 121 items (22.62%) classified as critical, as shown in table 5. These stories often cast the Chinese government in an unfavorable light, emphasizing delayed outbreak reporting, suppression of whistleblowers, censorship of domestic media, diplomatic disputes over virus origins, and tensions surrounding the "lab leak theory." Lexical markers such as "cover-up," "lack of transparency," and "authoritarian control" commonly appeared, constructing a narrative that portrayed the Chinese government as evasive or culpable in the global spread of COVID-19.

By contrast, positive tone was least frequent, appearing in only 21 items (3.92%). These instances typically highlighted successful containment measures, innovations in testing and vaccine development, or instances of international collaboration involving Chinese institutions. The scarcity of favorable coverage underscores CNN's tendency to foreground critical or skeptical perspectives in reporting on China, echoing patterns observed in broader Western media (Ate & Ikerodah, 2021; Zhang, 2023).

Table 5. The Tone of CNN News

Frames	News Items	Proportion
Positive	21	3.92%
Neutral	393	73.46%
Negative	121	22.62%

Overall, the tone distribution predominantly neutral, followed by a smaller but significant negative share, and minimal positive coverage suggests that CNN maintained an informational yet selectively critical stance. While the prevalence of neutral reporting reflects adherence to editorial objectivity as an international broadcaster, the substantial proportion of negative stories and the rarity of positive portrayals frame the Chinese government within a problem-centered narrative, consistent with the dynamics of responsibility and conflict framing (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

While these variations may hint at nuanced editorial leanings or tonal tendencies, a statistical assessment is necessary to confirm whether the differences are significant and represent systematic patterns rather than random fluctuations.

To rigorously evaluate this relationship, a Chi-square test of independence (χ^2 test) was employed. This test determines whether the distribution of tone categories is independent of the media outlet or if a meaningful association exists between the two variables.

Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no association between the media outlet (BBC/CNN) and the tone of coverage (positive/neutral/negative).

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is an association between the media outlet and the tone of coverage.

The test results are as follows:

Table 6. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.290 [a]	2	.318
Likelihood Ratio	2.293	2	.318
N of Valid Cases	724		

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether there was a significant association between media outlet (BBC or CNN) and the tone of coverage (positive, neutral, or negative) in the sample of 724 digital video news items. The test compared the observed tone distributions of the two outlets to determine whether the differences in tone were greater than would be expected by chance.

The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that there is no association between media outlet and tone of coverage, indicating that tone is independent of whether the video was produced by BBC or CNN. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposed that an association exists, meaning that tone distribution would differ significantly between the two outlets.

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 6. The Pearson Chi-Square statistic was $\chi^2(2, N = 724) = 2.290$, $p = 0.318$, and the Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square was nearly identical at 2.293 ($p = 0.318$), as shown in table 6. Since the p-value exceeds the conventional 0.05 significance threshold, the test results indicate that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. This means that the differences in tone distribution between BBC and CNN are not statistically significant, and the tone of coverage appears to be independent of the media outlet.

Although descriptive statistics indicated that BBC exhibited a slightly higher proportion of negative coverage (27.51%) compared to CNN (22.62%), and CNN produced marginally more positive coverage (3.92%) than BBC (2.65%), these

variations were not large enough to reach statistical significance. Overall, the results confirm that both outlets demonstrated broadly comparable tone distributions, characterized primarily by neutral reporting with limited positive coverage and moderate negative coverage of the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 7 presents the symmetric measures Phi and Cramér's V which assess the strength of association between the two nominal variables in this study: media outlet (BBC or CNN) and tone of coverage (positive, neutral, negative). These measures complement the Chi-square test by quantifying the magnitude of any relationship detected, regardless of statistical significance (Krippendorff, 1980).

The Phi coefficient for the relationship is 0.056, with an approximate significance value of p = 0.318. Phi values range from 0 to 1, where values closer to 0 indicate a very weak association. In this study, the Phi value of 0.056 suggests an extremely weak relationship between media outlet and tone.

Similarly, Cramér's V is also 0.056 (p = 0.318). Cramér's V is preferred for contingency tables larger than 2×2 because it adjusts for the number of rows and columns. In this 2×3 table (two outlets by three tone categories), as shown in table 7, a Cramér's V of 0.056 also reflects a negligible association according to conventional benchmarks (0.1 = weak, 0.3 = moderate, 0.5 = strong) (Cohen, 1968).

Table 7. Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.056	.318
	Cramer's V	.056	.318
N of Valid Cases	724		

The p-value of 0.318 confirms that the observed association is not statistically significant, aligning with the Chi-square results in Table 6. In other words, BBC and CNN do not differ meaningfully in their overall tone distribution toward the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The symmetric measures reinforce the conclusion that tone is largely independent of media outlet, with both networks exhibiting comparable editorial patterns dominated by neutral coverage.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The results reveal that both BBC and CNN overwhelmingly relied on the responsibility frame, emphasizing the Chinese government's accountability in managing the pandemic. This aligns with prior research suggesting that Western media tend to foreground narratives of responsibility and transparency when reporting on non-democratic states during crises (Entman, 2007). BBC's greater use of human-interest framing indicates a deliberate editorial approach to humanize the pandemic by showcasing the lived experiences of Chinese citizens, which simultaneously evokes empathy and reinforces institutional accountability. CNN mostly used the responsibility frame in its coverage, similarly underscoring accountability but often situating these narratives within economic consequence frames (9.5%), emphasizing the global market and supply chain effects of China's pandemic management.

Tone analysis also demonstrates that neutral coverage predominated across both networks, complemented by a moderate share of negative stories and minimal positive portrayal, in other words, negative news outweighs positive news. This distribution underscores the subtlety of Western media critiques: while overtly hostile narratives were limited, the scarcity of positive representations contributes to an implicitly skeptical portrayal of the Chinese government. The Chi-square test and Cramér's V results confirm that tonal differences between BBC and CNN were not statistically significant, suggesting a convergent editorial approach in framing China's pandemic response.

As for the value of science, this study adds value to scholarship on media framing and international political communication in three ways. First, it extends generic framing research from text-based news to digital video online news, providing evidence that accountability-oriented framing (especially the responsibility frame) dominates COVID-19 government coverage across two major Western outlets. Second, by jointly examining frames and tone within the same dataset, the results refine expectations about outlet divergence: while framing emphases differ in specific dimensions (e.g., human-interest vs. economic consequences), overall tone distributions do not significantly diverge, suggesting that framing differences may operate through *what aspects are foregrounded* rather than through overt evaluative polarity. Third, the study offers a replicable coding approach (tone + five generic frames with intercoder reliability) that can be reused to compare other countries, crises, or platforms, enabling cumulative evidence-building on how video journalism constructs government performance narratives during global emergencies.

These findings reflect the complex interplay of journalistic norms, geopolitical considerations, and digital affordances in shaping international perceptions. Neutral tone, often perceived as objective, can still carry implicit ideological weight

through selective framing and omission. Furthermore, the study highlights how digital video journalism, with its multimodal storytelling, enhances the emotional and interpretive impact of frames, potentially amplifying global narratives of accountability and skepticism toward China during a health crisis.

5.2 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Western media framing of the Chinese government during COVID-19 was characterized by responsibility-driven narratives, largely neutral tone, moderate negative tone and limited positive representation. BBC and CNN's digital video coverage adhered to an ostensibly objective style, yet their framing choices consistently foregrounded state accountability and transparency issues, subtly shaping global perceptions of China's governance.

Theoretically, the study reinforces the applicability of framing theory in digital video journalism, illustrating how tone and frames interact to produce nuanced geopolitical narratives. Practically, it offers insights into the mechanisms by which international media construct and disseminate crisis-oriented portrayals of non-Western governments, with potential implications for public diplomacy and global opinion formation.

Future research should expand the scope to include other Western and non-Western media outlets, employ multimodal analysis to capture the full sensory and emotional dimensions of video framing, and consider audience reception studies to understand how these narratives influence international public opinion. By integrating cross-platform and cross-cultural perspectives, subsequent studies can deepen our understanding of media's role in shaping the geopolitics of health crises in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

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Authors contributions

Zhuang Jiang was responsible for study design, data collection, and drafting the manuscript. Associate Professor Dr. Juliana Abdul Wahab supervised the study and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. There are no special authorship agreements.

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