

# Research on communication behavior between China and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mingxuan Zhao

School of Journalism & Communication, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, 510000, China

lustyzhao225@163.com

**Abstract.** This article critically examines and contrasts the communication responses of China and the United States to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in Wuhan, China, at the beginning of 2020. By focusing on mass communication and semiotics, we delve into how these two nations have grappled with the crisis. In particular, we explore the communication strategies employed by major social media platforms in each country during the pandemic. Additionally, we investigate public perceptions and reactions toward China based on U.S. media coverage. This comparative analysis sheds light on the pivotal role of communication in shaping global understanding and responses to public health emergencies, emphasizing the need for nuanced and context-aware approaches.

**Keywords:** Public attitudes and behavior, Culture differences, Public opinion battle, Social media communication strategies.

## 1. Introduction

At the outset of 2020, the emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) thrust the global community into an unparalleled crisis. Within an astonishingly brief timeframe of approximately one month, this virus rapidly disseminated to every corner of the world. Governments worldwide promptly implemented emergency preventive measures. However, the responses of China and the United States to the pandemic diverged significantly, particularly in terms of information dissemination.

The Chinese government swiftly enforced stringent information control measures, tightly managing the outbreak's propagation. Their approach emphasized centralized communication channels, authoritative messaging, and strict censorship. By tightly controlling the narrative, China aimed to prevent panic, maintain social stability, and project an image of competence. However, critics argue that this approach hindered transparency and hindered the timely sharing of critical information.

In contrast, the U.S. government adopted a distinct communication strategy. While emphasizing transparency, they faced challenges related to information overload and the proliferation of misinformation. The decentralized nature of communication in the United States allowed for diverse voices, but it also led to conflicting messages. The media played a crucial role, with both traditional outlets and social media platforms disseminating information, sometimes inaccurately. The public grappled with discerning reliable sources from sensationalism.

This article aims to utilize communication theories and relevant knowledge to expound upon, compare, and analyze the communication behavior of both countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the roles and functions of their respective governments, media, and the public, we gain insights into the complexities of crisis communication in a globalized world.

## 2. Mass Communication During the Pandemic

Mass communication is one of the primary forms of communication in contemporary society, alongside interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and other modes. Various definitions exist for mass communication, but one of the most representative definitions characterizes

it as the practice of modern print, broadcast, and audiovisual media organizations using corporate resources, advanced technology, and industrial means to provide information and entertainment products to unknown audiences within the scope of national regulation. Notably, mass communication emphasizes its mass appeal; print media, radio, and television are the most accessible communication channels for the public, serving as significant sources of information.

In the context of the pandemic in China, we temporarily exclude network-based communication such as mobile apps. This decision accounts for the relatively low internet penetration rate among older individuals in our country. For this demographic, television news and radio remain the primary sources of information. The definition of mass communication<sup>1</sup> highlights that it operates within the framework of national regulation, targeting unknown audiences. In China, this aspect is well-illustrated. When the COVID-19 outbreak rapidly escalated, China Central Television (CCTV) began comprehensive coverage, disseminating relevant information about the pandemic to ordinary citizens through news broadcasts and advertisements. Government agencies, including the National Health Commission, issued notifications and directives for effective preventive measures. Throughout the pandemic, both national and local television media repeatedly broadcasted pandemic-related information, exemplifying the significant production and replication characteristic of mass communication. Consequently, citizens receive daily updates on suspected cases, confirmed cases, and fatalities, enhancing transparency and providing crucial information for assessing safety in their surroundings. The environmental monitoring function of mass communication becomes particularly relevant in such dynamic situations. For instance, during a pandemic, timely monitoring and understanding of the evolving environment are essential for human survival and development.

In contrast, the United States failed to implement preventive and containment measures when the pandemic began spreading domestically. Furthermore, the dissemination of misinformation to the public contributed to the U.S. surpassing China in confirmed cases. For instance, CNN advised the public early in the pandemic that wearing masks was unnecessary unless an individual had a confirmed diagnosis. While ideological differences may explain some of these disparities, safeguarding public health should be the primary message conveyed by both government and media. Consequently, the content disseminated by media led the U.S. public to perceive the threat to their lives as insufficient, contributing to the rapid increase in infection rates.

Mass communication serves as a conduit for news, information, and knowledge, helping us understand external trends and changes. Therefore, ensuring effective mass communication that conveys accurate and beneficial information to the public is of utmost importance.

### **3. Symbols and Significance in Communication During the Pandemic**

In everyday life, symbols are often associated with punctuation marks or emoticons used in online chat. However, within the field of communication studies, the meaning of symbols extends far beyond these simple representations. Japanese scholar Shigeeko Nagai<sup>2</sup> argues that if there exists a referential or descriptive relationship between object X and object Y, and X can represent or describe Y, then X functions as a symbol for Y. In the context of communication studies, ‘meaning’ refers to the significance attributed to objects by humans—spiritual content transmitted and exchanged in symbolic form. Understanding these concepts allows us to analyze how the public in China and the United States react to the pandemic based on their respective ideologies.

Symbols are products of human creation, constantly evolving. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public commonly referred to it as the ‘Wuhan virus.’ This association stemmed from the fact that the first confirmed case emerged in Wuhan, coupled with limited public understanding

---

<sup>1</sup> Zhan, N. (2019). “The Origin of ‘Mass Communication’: Social Context, Fundamental Issues, and Value Perspectives.” *Journal of Journalism and Communication Research*, 26(11), 75-93+127-128.

<sup>2</sup> Nagai, S., & Wada, K. *Philosophical Logic: Foundations and Research*. [Journal Article].

of this novel virus. Consequently, the term ‘Wuhan virus’ became synonymous with the ‘novel coronavirus.’ This illustrates the fundamental function of symbols: expression and comprehension. By symbolizing the virus in this way, it became more accessible and familiar to the public. However, the term ‘Wuhan virus’ carries not only explicit meaning but also implicit connotations. When using this term, biases and discrimination may subtly accompany it. Instances such as signs declaring ‘No entry for Wuhan residents’ reinforce this point. Most symbols possess both explicit and implicit meanings, and individuals interpret these meanings based on what others attribute to a particular symbol, influencing their actions and connections.

Turning to the United States, when the virus first entered the country, it was not initially labeled as the ‘novel coronavirus.’ Instead, a more radical term emerged: the ‘Chinese Virus.’ This label gained traction on Twitter and remained a top search term. The association with China was partly due to the virus’s origin, but it was also influenced by the anti-China sentiment fostered during the Trump administration. This exemplifies another function of symbols: expression. Unless meaning is transformed into tangible symbolic forms, it cannot effectively propagate and endure across time and space. In the face of the pandemic, the U.S. public predominantly attributed blame to China, demonstrating that the reflective function of symbols did not significantly impact their perception. Similarly, the George Floyd protests highlighted the longstanding association of African Americans with crime and lower social status.

In summary, symbols play a critical role in shaping public discourse and responses during crises. Their multifaceted meanings influence perceptions, attitudes, and actions, underscoring the importance of understanding and critically analyzing symbolic communication.

#### **4. Comparison of Social Media in Chinese and the United States**

Due to the differing timelines of COVID-19 outbreaks in China and the United States, the content shared on mainstream social media platforms in these two countries has distinct emphases. Consequently, these differences contribute to varying public perceptions in China and the U.S.

When the pandemic began to spread widely, the Chinese government swiftly implemented measures, including mandatory mask-wearing outdoors and daily updates on infected individuals’ movement trajectories. In contrast, U.S. mainstream media initially underestimated the virus’s danger, leading to a delay of approximately three months before comprehensive preventive measures were announced. However, these measures eventually played a crucial role in educating the public about proper virus management.

Simultaneously, the U.S. media focused more on reporting specific events. For instance, the case of a 17-year-old girl who attended a church event with over 100 other children and subsequently died from COVID-19 garnered attention. In contrast, China emphasized widespread testing, immediate protective measures, and free medical care to reduce physical virus transmission.

The communication strategies employed by China and the United States in response to the COVID-19 pandemic reveal distinct approaches shaped by cultural, political, and technological factors. China’s social media landscape, particularly platforms like Weibo, seamlessly integrates text, images, videos, and live streaming, offering users a multifaceted and immersive experience. For instance, during the construction of the Leishenshan and Huoshenshan hospitals, the People’s Daily conducted real-time live broadcasts, allowing netizens to remotely monitor the progress—an engaging visual spectacle. Furthermore, China’s news reporting predominantly relies on concise messages, ensuring real-time updates based on actual developments. Real-time updates via concise messages ensure efficient dissemination of critical information.

In contrast, U.S. media, especially on platforms like Twitter, emphasizes depth through in-depth reporting of specific events. However, the use of satire and unconventional imagery may not always resonate with the public’s daily experiences. While China’s communication emphasizes national unity and resilience, the U.S. media’s polarization and skepticism have hindered a comprehensive

understanding of the global crisis. Recognizing these nuances is crucial for effective global communication and informed responses to public health emergencies.

## 5. Summary

In today's technologically advanced society, information dissemination extends beyond traditional broadcast and television channels. This trend necessitates not only a focus on traditional media but also an acknowledgment of the role played by online new media platforms. These digital channels provide a broader communication points of view, shaping how information reaches the public and influences their perceptions. As we navigate this evolving landscape, understanding the dynamics of both traditional and digital media becomes crucial for effective communication strategies. The advent of online new media has provided us with a immense and more expansive communication platform. Given this landscape, it becomes increasingly crucial to enhance mass communication practices, emphasizing standardization and intelligent approaches. The ultimate goal is to ensure that mass communication genuinely serves the public by disseminating accurate, effective, and beneficial information.

Simultaneously, the proliferation of symbols demands heightened discernment. Individuals must critically examine the underlying meanings of symbols to make informed judgments and effectively convey their intended messages. Symbolic discernment—interpreting masks, distancing, and hygiene—became pivotal. Exploring this complex field, our ability to decode symbols shapes public behavior and reinforces health guidelines. By doing so, we can navigate the complex landscape of communication and contribute to a more informed and connected society.

## References

- [1] Guo, Q. (2011). *Communication Studies Tutorial* [M]. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- [2] Li, J., & Li, S. (2023). A Study of the Communication Effects of Pandemic-related Video Works from the Perspective of Semiotics: A Case Study of Xinhua News Agency's "Discrepancies in COVID-19 Responses Between China and the United States." *Journal of Modern Media*, 31(1), 30-34. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1672-8122.2023.01.009.
- [3] Bai, X. (2021). *A Comparative Analysis of Official Media Account Content on COVID-19 Between China and the United States from the Crisis Communication Perspective* [Doctoral dissertation]. Lanzhou University of Finance and Economics.
- [4] Li, Y., & Zeng, R. (2020). Will the COVID-19 Pandemic Become a New Turning Point in International Internet Governance?—Institutional Changes, Sino-U.S. Conflict, and National Security Responses. *Journal of Intelligence*, 39(9), 110-115. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1002-1965.2020.09.018.
- [5] Hu, F. (2023). *Psychological and Behavioral Study of Social Media Fatigue Among Users in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [Master's thesis]. Shanghai: Shanghai International Studies University.
- [6] Li, M. (2023). *Emotional Analysis and Opinion Mining of COVID-19 Reporting in China and the United States* [Master's thesis]. Changchun: Changchun University of Science and Technology.