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### A frame analysis of the language used by eight US media to describe the role of China and Chinese in spreading Covid-19 during late January to early June 2020

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#### Abstract

A framing analysis of eight US media with different political bias was done to identify how they positioned themselves regarding the role of China in Covid-19 in the USA. The number of articles in the media varied much with Los Angeles Times leading with 32 articles discovered in the search. About 76% of all articles in the media were negative to China and 24% were sympathetic and only one article (American Conservative) saw the benefit of economic contribution of China to the USA. Both maximum negative and positive articles were seen in Los Angeles Times. All of the articles in the Star Tribune were negative and close to 95% in US today, also. However, the total numbers of articles in these two were only 15 and 19 respectively. Majority of articles in both right-centered and left-centered media were negative with obvious sympathetic stand of left-centered media towards China. On this basis, no definite association between political bias and positive or negative reporting on the role of China in Covid-19 spread in the USA exists for the eight US media studied. The results have been discussed with the aid of other works. Some limitations of this study are also discussed at the end.

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*Keywords:* Frame analysis, China, Chinese, US Media, Covid-19

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#### 1. Introduction

In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, there has been widespread anger and condemnation of China globally, but even more so in the USA, where a bitter trade war preceded the pandemic. A glance at the publications in the USA sheds some light on the feelings that a section of the population has regarding China. News 18, CNN (2020) accused China of spreading claims of success in controlling the virus while not clearing the doubts regarding its origin. In addition, it displayed its success in curbing the virus by sending supplies and medical experts around the world. Overall, China was engaged in confusing the world by using its media in a war of words. In an earlier article in the same online media on 10 May 2020 (CNN, 2020), the rift between China and the USA due to Coronavirus was discussed. Accusations against each other had reached a stage beyond the trade war to a stage of costing lives of people, which can take generations to heal. An 18-point plan was unveiled by senator Thom Tillis to

make China accountable for its coronavirus crimes. Therefore, it became evident in the early stages of the pandemic, that an anti-China sentiment was brewing in some sections of the USA.

From the reports in the media, it appeared as though a large proportion of Americans viewed China as the culprit for subjecting them to the hardships caused by the pandemic. It seemed as though very few felt that China was being blamed for no fault of theirs. There was also a clamour to blame the WHO and to hold it accountable for its gross negligence. Most of these publications, airing these views and opinions were either Right or Center right. While Left publications have mentioned Coronavirus, it was more in relation to how the USA was handling it or its strategic deficiencies in tackling the high increases in the affected cases, spread and mortality. The China allergy in the USA took many forms like blaming China for the cause of this Pandemic, targeting the WHO for not raising the alarm early enough, alleging that the WHO has become a stooge of China, calculating the economic losses and seeking compensation from China and doubting their casualty figures and alleging that they were being manipulated. The search for a cure is also not without controversy as the theories on the probable treatment vary and chiefly the drugs required have to come from China. So much is the change in the public mood that it is a part of the election campaign now – who sides with China and who does not.

China has already made a remarkable impact on the daily life of people in the USA. Cheaper Chinese imports are influencing many daily life needs of Americans. China has been able to penetrate as a major exporter where the US production-consumption gap needs exports and even displaced many other countries for the top spot as the leading importer for the USA. Therefore, when the trade was restricted / stopped due to the Pandemic, it had a debilitating impact for the American consumers. In retaliation to the US's actions on its import of Chinese goods, China banned frozen chicken from Tyson Foods and ordered the closure of Beijing unit of Pepsi (AFP, 2020). The perception of such trade restrictions on the US further fuelled the distrust of China among circles that were already suspicious of the country and its handling of Covid-19.

A historical comparison of the way in which the USA and China handled the Coronavirus with numerical status by Hiro (2020) showed that the World Leadership Trophy, which was with America since 1946, was handed to the People's Republic of China in a manner that is similar to the Suez Canal failure eclipsed the UK's colonial power, which could be called the "Suez moment" for the USA.

### *1.1. Literature review*

Differences in public views and media positions on China is not new as was seen in the case of current corona crisis. According to a PEW report (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019), in August 2019, the straining trade tensions between the US and China caused predominantly negative perceptions about China among the US public. The US impressions about China both before and after its conduct during the Olympics in 2008 was much lower than that of the Chinese in the survey results obtained by Heslop, Nadeau, and O'Reilly (2010). The impressions of Africans about China varied according to the topics of interest like trade, FDI and the whether the view is expressed by local or foreign media (Rebol, 2010). In a study on the Cancun Climate Change Conference of UNFCCC in 2010, a majority of US media outlets treated China in a balanced manner (Boykoff, 2012). In another study on 'China threat' coverage in the US print media over the period of 1992 to 2006, Yang and Liu (2012) observed that the threat perception followed economic growth rate of China till the 1990's, a cyclic pattern of three peaks in 1996, 2000 and 2005 and decline of this perception thereafter. The nature of these threats were perceived as political and ideological during 1992-1994 declining thereafter. A perception of China as a military and strategic threat was noticed in 1995 and this was visible till 2006. Throughout the study period, China was also perceived as an economic and trade threat which become increasingly evident in the later years. In the immediate past after Tiananmen and the Cold War eras, the New York Times (NYT)

championed the perception of China as an imagined enemy of USA. Three ideological themes were used in NYT during the decade of 1990-2000. These themes were containment, engagement and globalization. Plurality within the policy discourse, foreign realities especially of eastern contexts and plurality were dealt with (Lee, 2002).

### *1.2. Research questions*

The aim of this analysis is to evaluate the language used by the US media outlets on China and its citizens in spreading Coronavirus.

## **2. Method**

The study uses Frame Analysis or Framing in order to study the reports in American media about China and Covid-19. Frame (Framing) analysis was first proposed as a method of sociological research by Goffman (1974) and further by Entman (1991) and Gitlin (2003) to study and explain the role of the news media in defining issues for the public. Entman defined framing as a method “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p52). According to him “frames are information-processing schemata (Entman, 1991, p 7) that operates by selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Entman, 1993, p 53). Gitlin (1980) defined media frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual”. He also wanted to look for persistent patterns and not just isolated stories (Gitlin, 1980, p 7). Framing devices can be identified in the media reporting of issues like unions, feminism, environmentalism, antiracism and antiglobalization protests. According to Goffman (1974), events may be interpreted according to any of natural, social or institutional frameworks. Interpretation of natural events like earthquakes is unguided and does not constitute a moral judgment. Social frameworks are used for interpretation of actions as “guided doings” and may be subjected to social appraisals (p 22). News frames have become part and parcel of everyday reality. Media critics, Herman and Chomsky (1988) maintained that the media frame plays a vital role in presenting, shaping or destroying the picture of an event or story (p xiii). They observed that the U.S. media framed the Seattle protesters as “all-purpose agitators” (U.S. News & World Report), “terminally aggrieved” (Philadelphia Inquirer), simply against world trade (ABC News), and making “much ado about nothing” (CNN), but the real issue on which the events were based, were not considered (p. xiii). Thus, media frames can play multiple roles of stimulating opposition to or support for an event or issue, act as a judge of morality, provide causal interpretation and remedy or solution for media-focused problems, represent specific ideologies and include attractive words, metaphors, phrases etc. facilitating analysis of the tone in the coverage of an event or issue. Several studies suggested that the concept of ‘framing’ is now more or less established as a method in mass communication studies.

This method can be conveniently used for media content analysis (Matthes, 2009), although there are problems of “lack of operational precision, the descriptive focus of many analyses, neglect of visuals, and insufficient reporting of reliability” (Abstract), out of which methods to improve validity and reliability were proposed by Matthes and Kohring (2008).

### *2.1. Sample*

In this research, the following eight US media outlets varying in their political leaning (Mediabiasfactcheck, 2020) were selected (Table 1) and the contents relating the Coronavirus with

China were analyzed using frame analysis. Out of the eight media outlets, five were left-center and three were right/right-center. The period of evaluation was from January to June 2020. The maximum number of articles selected, 32, were from the Los Angeles Times, followed by 19 from USA Today and 17 from Washington Post. Only one article was selected from American Conservative.

**Table 1.** Media bias of the eight selected US media for this research according to Media Bias Fact Check (2020).

| Name of the selected US media | Political bias | Content dates   | No of articles |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---|----------------|
| American conservative         | Right-Centre   | 6 April   | 1              |
| Los Angeles Times             | Left-Centre    | 2 June, 18 May, 20 May, 12 May, 15 May, 3 May x 2, 29 May, 13 May, 9 May, 6 May, 4 May, 30 April, 30 April, 29 April, 27 April, 24 April, 23 April, 17 April, 16 April, 16 April x 2, 15 April, 15 April, 10 April, 7 April, 7 April, 3 April, 30 Mar, 17 Mar, 11 Mar, 10 Mar | 32             |
| News-day                      | Left-Centre    | 30 May, 24 May, 22 May, 5 May, 7 May, 6 May, 2 May, 2 May, 30 Apr, 27 Apr, 18 Apr, 3 Apr, 18 Feb, 27 Jan, 25 Jan  | 15             |
| Star Tribune                  | Left-Centre    | 27 Feb, 9 Mar, 14 Mar, 16 Mar, 7 Mar, 18 Feb, 13 Feb, 10 Feb, 1 Feb, 31Jan, 27 Jan, 4 June, 3 June, 3 June, 3 June  | 15             |
| USA Today                     | Left-Centre    | 18 May, 19 May, 15 May, 13 May, 6 May, 6 May, 5 May, 5 May, 1 May, 16 May, 24 April, 21 April, 17 May, 3 May, 18 April, 21 April, 16 April, 14 April, 22 April,   | 19             |
| Wall Street Journal           | Right-Centre   | 7 April, 28 April, 11 May, 3 Feb, 11 Feb, 18 Feb, 16 Feb, 24 Jan, 28 Jan, 28 Jan, 27 Jan, 27 Jan, 29 Jan  | 14             |
| Washington Examiner           | Right          | 27 Feb, 12 Mar, 19 Mar, 27 Mar, 16 Apr, 23 Apr, 23 Apr, 7 May, 14 May   | 9              |
| Washington Post               | Left-Centre    | 5 Apr, 7 Apr, 7 Apr, 7 Apr, 8 Apr, 8 Apr, 8 Apr, 9 Apr,   | 17             |

| Name of the selected US media | Political bias | Content dates  | No of articles |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--|----------------|
|                               |                | 9 Apr, 9 Apr, 9 Apr, 9 Apr, 9 Apr, 9 Apr, 10 Apr, 14 Apr, 15 Apr, 16 Apr |                |

### 2.2. Data collection procedures

In total, 122 articles were selected from all the eight media together. Out of this, 76% categorized China as the cause of the endemic. Except for one article in American Conservative, the balance 24% held a more sympathetic view of China. The one article in American Conservative as blue was the only one that treated the country for its commodity effect. Therefore, it may be surmised, that a large proportion of the American public viewed China negatively and as the cause of Coronavirus. The Los Angeles Times, which had 32 articles, had also the maximum frequencies of red and green categories. However, percentage wise, they were not the highest. Star Tribune and Washington Examiner both had 100% of their articles categorized in red.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The public moods as described above were well represented by the selected articles. Where the selected articles could be read, their links have been provided. Where these are subscription types the heading with one or two lines, the name of the author and date of publication is provided.

Color coding was used for identification of the frame of the article content. Thus, **Red** indicates categorization of China as the cause of the pandemic, **Green** denotes more sympathetic view towards China and **Blue** is used when the economic value of China (commodity) is evident. Such a categorization flows from an understanding that China’s economic status in the relation to the US cannot be ignored and therefore, attention must be paid to the different narratives being portrayed in the media regarding China. The number of articles in each media according to the color coding are given in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Frequency of article contents as per the color categorization for expression patterns in eight US media.

| Media                        | Total articles | <b>Red</b> | <b>Green</b> | <b>Blue</b> |
|------------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| American Conservative<br>R-C | 1              | 0          | 0            | 1           |
| Los Angeles Times<br>L-C     | 32             | 19 (60%)   | 13 (40%)     | 0           |
| Newsday L-C                  | 15             | 11 (70%)   | 4 (30%)      | 0           |
| Star Tribune L-C             | 15             | 15 (100%)  | 0            | 0           |
| USA Today L-C                | 19             | 18 (95%)   | 1 (5%)       | 0           |

|                              |     |          |          |         |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|---------|
| Wall Street Journal<br>R-C   | 14  | 6 (43%)  | 8 (57%)  | 0       |
| Washington Examiner<br>Right | 9   | 9 (100%) | 0        | 0       |
| Washington Post<br>L-C       | 17  | 15 (88%) | 2 (12%)  | 0       |
| Total                        | 122 | 93 (76%) | 28 (24%) | 1 (<1%) |

### 3. Results

All the five Left-Centre media together published 98 articles in total, out of which, 78 (80%) accused China as the cause of Coronavirus. Only 20% of the articles sympathized with China. Notably, all of the first four maximum numbers of articles were published by the Left-Centre media. Media outlets slanted towards the left were expected to support China. This did not happen. The American feeling might have overridden the favorable attitude towards China in these media outlets.

Even in the case of the three Right/Right-Centre media, with a considerably lower total number of articles, about 60% saw China as the cause of the epidemic. This is not surprising due to their political leanings. The only surprise is the very low number of articles published. Higher numbers could have supported the right-wing cause much better. Thus, clearly, irrespective of the political leanings, all the media showed the tendency of cultivating and supporting an American view to the world with respect to a serious issue like a pandemic viral disease creating havoc across all nations.

Of the eight media outlets, five were Left-Centre and three were Right or Right-Centre (R-C). In the USA, R-C can be expected to toe the line of China being the cause of Corona. On the other hand, L-C or Left Centre media can be expected to be more sympathetic to China. Table 3 provides how the overall trend of these political biases had been.

**Table 3.** Frequencies of color categories according to political bias of US media.

| Political bias     | Total | Red | Green | Blue |
|--------------------|-------|-----|-------|------|
| Left-Centre        | 98    | 78  | 20    | 0    |
| Right/Right-Centre | 24    | 15  | 8     | 1    |

### 4. Discussion

While the above research was done using thematic or content analysis, frame analysis was used in many works. In a discussion paper, Saleem (2007) used the concept of framing in different perspectives to analyze the US media outlets' framing of foreign countries. The author cited many other researchers to establish that the mass media can shape the understanding or misunderstanding of people about each other's countries. The original intention of mass media was to inform people about what is happening in the world outside of them. Thus, mass media has the ability to construct the image of peoples and

communities of the world and function as an agent to shape the views and perceptions of people about other countries. The US media frames of other countries included the perspectives of the socio-economic, political, military, cultural, and ideological similarities and differences with the USA. Positive or negative bias was noticeable in these reporting depending on the country and how closely it supports the US position on these issues. Such a bias may also be understood as reports in the media that portray China in a negative light for purely ideological reasons or consider a more holistic view of the issues involving the country. Similar trends can be noticed in this research on US media reports on Chinese role in Coronavirus.

One of the reasons for the centric, right or left centric nature of the US media reports on the issue may be the regional circulation differences of the eight media outlets. Such a possibility was shown by the results of a study by Lu and Tao (2018). Those US newspapers, which had higher circulation in areas where Chinese exports were more, carried negative news about China and supported democrats to a greater extent translated into greater share of votes for democrats in the elections held between 2000 and 2012. In another framing study by Su and Borah (2019), overseas Chinese students were often portrayed differently as victims and patriots by Chinese media and as liberalists and knowledge seekers by the US and Hong Kong media. In this study also, there were both positive and negative portrayal of China. The relationship of the different portrayals with media political bias often determined by their circulation patterns is obvious.

A frame analysis of the Malaysian, Chinese and US media in reporting the incident of the Malaysian MH370 disappearance, led to the identification of attribution of responsibility as the major frame and varying levels of conflict and human-interest frames as the secondary frames. Differences in national interests, risk evaluation by the society and contextualization of diplomatic relations and cultures were also noticed (Bier, Park, & Palenchar, 2018). Another framing analysis comparing the news coverage of the two main terrorist attacks in USA and China from 142 news stories in CCTV and CNN was done by Du and Li (2017). They implemented the use of factors including attitude towards local government and perpetrators, origin and source of the news, theme coverage, how the incident was defined and how the cause of the incident was perceived. The framing strategies of the media were based on their ideological bias and national interests. Such divergent views about China in the US media were shown in this study, too.

Even social media platforms like Twitter may reflect the media bias. This was evident from the studies of Guo, Mays, and Wang (2019) on the dominance of the US media in setting the agenda for impact of their coverage of South China Sea. On the other hand, the Chinese and Philippines media showed only minimal to moderate impact. The nature of the US–China relations is the key determinant of what media say about each other. Even, the media reports shape the nature of the relationship. Valuation of Chinese national currency and its cyber espionage adventurism were the frequent themes in US news media determining the nature of US-China relationship according to Ooi and D'arcangelis (2017). These results show that the impact of media may be felt in shaping the public perception as well as government policies.

The two recurring major themes in English language media are of China's threat to global peace and stability due to its rapid rise towards global economic and military leadership. This frame is contrasted with the framing of USA as a declining superpower. The contrasting image of the two countries was described using the metaphor "Thucydides trap" to indicate that the challenge of a great power by another leads to war. This metaphor symbolizes increasing tensions, which are likely to result in serious conflicts between the two countries. China attempts to enhance its international image and get more support for its position. On the other hand, English language media outlets are busy revealing their anxiety about the global ambitions of China. This frame analysis was done by Okuda (2016). The two

diametrically opposite image created by the media about the two countries can contribute to any perception of China in any other issue also negatively, as witnessed in the case of Covid-19 reporting.

In a different perspective, a framing analysis of the image of China in Latin American media was done by Estupinan and Deyby (2017). China was perceived positively with respect to economic and investment activities and negatively perceived on environment, copyrights, democracy and military development. Most of the media articles were authored by European and US news agencies, which supposedly explains the political bias of Latin American media. The ability of issue-based, positive or negative perception, is often masked by over-expression of national interests. This is also a possible reason for the observations of this study.

The differences in reporting the specific project of One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative of China by China Daily and Financial Times was analyzed by Zhang and Wu (2017). China Daily stressed on this initiative as a proof of its positive attributes and construct positive images of China as a peace-loving nation, an international co-operator and an emerging globally responsible economic power. Financial Times, on the other hand, displayed mixed and conflicting style of describing the image of China. On the positive side, China was portrayed as a country with significant impact on the global economy. On the negative side, it projected China as an authoritarian, a militant and obstructive force posing serious geopolitical threats. In this case, the same issue causes two different types of reactions based on the two different perceptions. Some of the US media reports contained both positive and negative contents about China's role in Covid-19 in this research.

In the post-World War I scenario, China was not a strong contender for a globally important image. It had to struggle for a long time to achieve its current domination. Wang (2018) examined the social basis of attitude and policies of the USA towards China during May Fourth Movement (1919) and Washington Conference (1921–1922) by focusing on reports on China in the US mainstream media, the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times. The media did not fully endorse the US government's attitude towards China. The media outlets were more sympathetic towards China. These media outlets explained their stand by differentiating between the support of the Chinese government and that of the Chinese people to save democracy and rule of law. From these historical accounts, it seems natural that China's desire for challenging the superpowers was triggered by the historical discrimination and sidelining it suffered till recently. If the US media would find faults with China on Corona, it could be perceived as the reflection of a threat from China to USA.

It could be argued that the current President of the USA has seen a downward performing economy and an upward trend of an epidemic; awarding the country the world leader status on a wrong parameter. Therefore, and based on this view, the US election 2016 is to blame for this disaster leading to the next re-election of Trump. This view prompted an extensive analyses which was done by Jiang (2020) on 1578 news stories from 62 sources from the three media ecologies of Russia, China and the Arab countries during the 2016 presidential campaign and immediately afterward. The US presidential election 2016 was significant in many ways. Instead of viewing the election solely from the American perspective, the book dealt with how the election was reported, perceived and attracted controversies on it by different sections of the world population in a way impacting the domestic audiences as well in comprehending their own politics. The single focus of the book was on the concept of soft power and the way the non-Western media upheld, contested and changed the perceptions about the soft power of the USA using the strategic narratives circulated in their respective media systems. The analysis of the 1578 media content by the authors showed that about 96% of Chinese and 88% of Arab coverage of the election was neutral. Inaccurate information in these media were 23% and 4% respectively. About 14% of Arab media content was favorable towards Hillary Clinton, while it was only 1% in the Chinese media. Higher professionalism and objectivity was visible in the case of Arab media. Hillary Clinton received positive views in 1% of pro-government and neutral Russian media. Trump was projected in



41% of Arab media negatively, while it was only 21% in Chinese media and 12% in pro-government and 28% in neutral Russian media. Many strategic narratives of these countries were also linked with various media expressions in this context. It is the leadership that is responsible for any serious issue affecting its population. The US media has been critical of US President in handling the pandemic when it was also blaming China for its role. Whether Trump is re-elected for a second term might well answer which of these is correct.

Lastly, a remark must be made on the limitations of this research paper. Starting with the methods used. Framing analysis has been criticized by some authors. Those criticisms may apply to this research as well. In addition to this, for the sample size, only eight US media outlets were selected. However, they were not selected based on circulation ranking. Media with low circulation may have little impact on shaping people's views on China with respect to Covid-19. The political biases of the media were not very distinct to clearly categorize the reports according to the bias. It seems, in the USA, there are no clear left oriented media, as nationalism overrides political bias. Sometimes, the content of the reports in selected media were not so clearly indicative of any political bias. This made categorization as per political bias difficult. More extensive research using voluminous media outlets with clear political bias are suggested for future research.

## 5. Conclusions

The positive or negative perceptions of a country by another country depend on how the media portray the other country. The US media had been almost consistently attacking China for its alleged role in delivering a strong pandemic from which USA (and the world) are unable to pull through. A small percentage of US media reports are positive about the economic contribution of China to the USA. However, the overall US media perception is negative.

## 6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: 21.01.2021).

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## Sekiz ABD medyası tarafından Çin ve Çin'in Ocak sonu ile Haziran 2020 başı arasında Covid-19'u yaymadaki rolünü tanımlamak için kullanılan dilin çerçeve analizi

### Öz

ABD'deki Covid-19'da Çin'in rolü konusunda kendilerini nasıl konumlandıklarını belirlemek için farklı siyasi önyargılara sahip sekiz ABD medyasının çerçeveleme analizi yapıldı. Medyadaki makale sayısı, Los Angeles Times'ın arama keşfedilen 32 makaleyle başı çekmesiyle büyük farklılıklar gösterdi. Medyadaki tüm makalelerin yaklaşık% 76'sı Çin'e olumsuz geldi ve% 24 sempatikti ve sadece bir makale (Amerikan Muhafazakarı) Çin'in ABD'ye ekonomik katkısının faydasını gördü. Los Angeles Times'da hem maksimum olumsuz hem de olumlu makaleler görüldü. Star Tribune'deki tüm makaleler olumsuzdu ve bugün ABD'de de% 95'e yakındı. Ancak bu ikisindeki toplam makale sayısı sırasıyla sadece 15 ve 19 idi. Hem sağ merkezli hem de sol merkezli medyadaki makalelerin çoğu, sol merkezli medyanın Çin'e karşı bariz sempatik duruşuyla olumsuzdu. Bu temelde, incelenen sekiz ABD medyası için siyasi önyargı ile ABD'deki Covid-19 yayılmasında Çin'in rolüne ilişkin olumlu veya olumsuz haber arasında kesin bir ilişki yoktur. Sonuçlar diğer çalışmaların yardımıyla tartışıldı. Bu çalışmanın bazı sınırlılıkları da sonunda tartışılacaktır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Çerçeve analizi, Çin, Çin, ABD Medyası, Covid-19

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