



# Iowa Journal of Communication

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**Volume 53**

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**Communication Theory of Identity, Identity Gap Theory, and MotherScholaring during COVID-19** pg. 7  
by Sarah Symonds LeBlanc, Elizabeth L. Spradley, Heather K. Olson Beal, Lauren E. Burrow, and Chrissy Cross

*This article uses an interactive interviewing approach to capture the lived experiences of five MotherScholars during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and identity gaps, we aim to understand how COVID-19 impacted our MotherScholar identities. While CTI and identity gap research has advanced a layered perspective of identity across different contexts, the research is just beginning to explore gaps within and between layers to understand how individuals and groups make sense of those gaps. Our use of “collaborative autoethnography” enables us to extend CTI and identity gap research by teasing out identity gaps that we experienced as MotherScholars in COVID-19. As MotherScholars we negotiated our identities within ourselves and with other MotherScholars, colleagues, administration, and family. Practical implications of MotherScholar identity gaps go beyond individual coping strategies and include calls for administration, human resources, and higher education to partner with MotherScholars for collective action.*

**Rumormonger? Whistleblower? Martyr?: How the U.S. and Chinese Media Framed the Narrative of COVID-19 Doctor Li Wenliang** pg. 28  
by Zhenzhu Zhang and Steven J. Venette

*This study explores news stories regarding Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the first people who tried to raise the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, and eventually died from the disease. The way Dr. Li Wenliang was depicted in the media changed over time. Understanding how that depiction changed is important because it helps demonstrate how narratives function to frame crises. The current study uses framing and narrative theories to support thematic analysis. Observing how a narrative changes allows for a more nuanced perspective of how crises are communicated and understood by the community. Three major themes emerged from the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang both in China and the United States: rumormonger, whistleblower and politicized icon, and martyr. The findings identify internal and external sources of pressure that can cause the media to change their storytelling. This analysis suggests that, in the*

*future, people like Dr. Li Wenliang, when framed as martyrs or heroes, can help the public deal with confusion and uncertainty that surrounds a crisis.*

**Watching the watchdogs: Online News Commenters' Critiques of Journalistic Performance During Terrorist Attacks** pg. 49  
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*This international comparative analysis explores what categories the public uses to evaluate the media performances of American and French journalists and media covering terrorist attacks. Specifically, the study looked at the Boston Marathon bombing (2013), and the Paris (Bataclan) terrorist attacks (2015), and the related online news stories comment sections of The New York Times and Le Figaro. The online comments of each news story were examined through a qualitative content analysis. The study shows that in a time of crisis commenters both appreciate and criticize journalistic performance and make direct demands to the journalists and editors. When applying journalistic norms and values to their critiques (criticism, plaudits, direct demands), commenters tended to fall with two categories - puritans and realists. They either drew from the ideal journalistic norms that should be upheld no matter what or judged journalistic performance through the lenses of the current context of the crises. Similarities and differences between the two countries and cases are also discussed.*

**Facebook Top Fans, Opinion Leadership, & Perceived News Bias: A Modern Application of Two-Step Flow to Online News Distribution** pg. 70  
by Sherice Gearhart, Bingbing Zhang, and Sydney E. Brammer

*News distributed via Facebook features comments, which influence audiences. Integrating hostile media bias and two-step flow, this study tests whether an individual's issue positions, experiences, and exposure to comments influence how Top Fans and others perceive news bias. A survey experiment using a nationwide sample of Facebook users (N = 319) tested the influence of the opinion climate on COVID-19 vaccinations and federal student loan forgiveness. Results show visible opinion leaders (i.e., Top Fans) differently perceived bias in news content.*

**Book Review: Computer Mediated Communication Strategies for Organizations During COVID-19 Pandemic** pg.90  
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## Welcome from the Editor

Kristen L. Majocha

Welcome to the 53<sup>rd</sup> special edition of the Iowa Journal of Communication. We are an award-winning state journal that publishes the highest quality peer-reviewed scholarship on a variety of communication topics. Our journal is a product of the Iowa Communication Association, a professional organization whose purpose is to unite those persons with academic and professional interests in all disciplines of Communication and the Performing Arts.

This special issue engages the topic of crisis communication. The first article by Sarah Symonds LeBlanc, Elizabeth L. Spradley, Heather K. Olson Beal, Lauren E. Burrow, and Chrissy Cross uses an interactive interviewing approach to capture the lived experiences of five MotherScholars during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, authors Zhenzhu Zhang and Steven J. Venette explore news stories regarding Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the first people who tried to raise the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, and eventually died from the disease. Ioana A. Coman then conducts a comparative analysis of American and French media performance of journalists and media covering terrorist attacks. The last research article by Sherice Gearhart, Bingbing Zhang, and Sydney Brammer tests whether an individual's issue positions, experiences, and exposure to comments influence how Top Fans and others perceive news bias, specifically during a pandemic. Paul Lucas caps off this special edition with a book review of Computer Mediated Communication Strategies for Organizations During COVID-19 Pandemic (Royal Brand, 2021),

Manuscripts are now being sought for Volume 54. Submissions may focus on any type of communication. Approaches may be either philosophical, theoretical, critical, applied, pedagogical, or empirical in nature. Submissions from all geographic areas are encouraged, and one need not be a member of the Iowa Communication Association to submit. We are particularly interested in unique, non-standard approaches and voices. The deadline is April 30th, 2022. Email [majocha@calu.edu](mailto:majocha@calu.edu) for more information.



Kristen L. Majocha, PhD  
Editor

## **Communication Theory of Identity, Identity Gap Theory, and MotherScholaring during COVID-19**

Sarah Symonds LeBlanc, Elizabeth L. Spradley, Heather K. Olson  
Beal, Lauren E. Burrow, and Chrissy Cross

*This article uses an interactive interviewing approach to capture the lived experiences of five MotherScholars during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and identity gaps, we aim to understand how COVID-19 impacted our MotherScholar identities. While CTI and identity gap research has advanced a layered perspective of identity across different contexts, the research is just beginning to explore gaps within and between layers to understand how individuals and groups make sense of those gaps. Our use of “collaborative autoethnography” enables us to extend CTI and identity gap research by teasing out identity gaps that we experienced as MotherScholars in COVID-19. As MotherScholars we negotiated our identities within ourselves and with other MotherScholars, colleagues, administration, and family. Practical implications of MotherScholar identity gaps go beyond individual coping strategies and include calls for administration, human resources, and higher education to partner with MotherScholars for collective action.*

Negotiating between the spheres of work and family has been ongoing with scholars paying “increasing attention to work/life issues” (Wieland, 2011, p. 163) for nearly twenty years. Scholarship examined how women negotiate between work and life in terms of family (D’Enbeau, et al., 2015; Kirby et al., 2016; Wieland, 2011) but also how to separate work from family and vice-versa (Turner & Norwood, 2013). This scholarship looks at either a work perspective (Kirby et al., 2003), from a dutiful wife perspective (Denker, 2013), or how some mothering behaviors cause work and family to mix (Turner & Norwood, 2013). But in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the spheres of work and family to collide resulting in an unexplored phenomenon of how one negotiates work and family in the same place at the same time.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered how many approach their work and their families (Stephens et al., 2020). This includes both men and women academics, although women academics are found to carry a heavier burden in the areas of work and family (Pettit, 2020; Supiano, 2021). Women academics with children are predicted to have lost an average of 90 minutes of work per day, with the disruption hurting women academics with children of the age of 7 and below more (Pettit, 2020). For many women academics with

children, the COVID-19 pandemic upheaved their lives, resulting in the deterioration of work and family balance (Mannon, 2021). Like many others in the world, academics were under stay-at-home orders with their families because local schools and daycares closed and universities moved face-to-face classes online. Spradley et al. (2021) found that COVID-19 caused the MotherScholar identity to fracture, resulting in women academics finding themselves negotiating between scholar and mother.

The term MotherScholar derives from research examining mothers who are academics in higher education. Burrow et al. (2020) expand the definition by suggesting it incorporates mother academics who creatively weave their mother identity into the academic identity and their academic identity into motherhood. While earlier research saw the term MotherScholar hyphenated (Lapayese, 2012), we follow the non-hyphenated approach introduced by Burrow et al. as our way of seeing this “complicated identity” (p. 4245). Like Burrow et al., we capitalize both Mother and Scholar to highlight the importance these identities have on us. While we learned to embrace the term MotherScholar, wearing the term proudly on t-shirts, we did not get there overnight. Instead, our journey to acceptance of the term MotherScholar as a part of our identity was partially realized by negotiating and blending our Mother and Scholar identities during COVID-19.

This study explores how five MotherScholars negotiate the merging of their mother and academic identities and the impact this negotiation has on their professional and parental identities. Specifically, this study looks at how we communicated our Mother and Scholar identities during stay-at-home orders during COVID-19. We examine this journey through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (Jackson et al., 2019) and Identity Gap Theory (Jung, 2004), specifically focusing on interpenetration and identity gaps. In the sections that follow, we explore both theories and explain our method and approach to data collection.

#### **Communication Theory of Identity**

We define our identities through communication, and our communication with others influences our identities; hence, we needed a theory that examined both identity and communication. Jackson et al., (2019) contend that identity is communication and communication is identity. With that communication-as-identity perspective in mind, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) emerged as a relevant theoretical grounding for our MotherScholar project. CTI “focuses more on mutual influences between identity and communication” through enactment, relationships, and groups (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). At the cornerstone of CTI are four layers of identity: 1) personal identity – one’s self-concept or image of oneself; 2) enacted identity – performed or expressed identity; 3)



relational identity – identity developed by ascribed relational identity, relationships with others, relationships with other identities, and the relationship as a unit of identity; and 4) communal identity – how collectivities and groups define identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). At its essence, CTI “posits that individuals internalize social interactions, relationships, and a sense self into identities through communication” and, in turn, express or enact identities through communication (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 139). While originally introduced in 1993, the heuristic of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) is evident in the scholarship that it has inspired. “Since 2004 there have been over thirty-five studies that have employed CTI as a way of exploring a wide range of phenomena” (Jackson et al., 2019, p. 197). Because of space issues, we choose to focus on two main terms from the theory: interpenetration and identity gap.

### **Interpenetration**

CTI’s layered approach to identity demonstrates how identity is experienced with paradox, polarity, holism, collectivism, and interplay between identity layers (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht et al. (1993) defines penetration as when identities overlap and collide between the layers and this occurs between four layers: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. When the personal layer interacts with the layers of enactment, relationships, and groups (Hecht et al., 2000), the penetration of layers occurs. Interpenetration enriches a person’s sense of self, causing a negotiation between what identity is more appropriate for a particular context.

Acknowledging that the layers of identity penetrate between the layers, research focusing on interpenetration between the communal and personal layers examines how serial killers justified their actions (personal) by claiming societal influences (communal layer) drove them to kill and that they lacked control over their behaviors (Henson & Olson, 2010). With a basis of understanding the penetration of communal and personal layers, we can demonstrate how family (communal) may impact one’s mother identity or how work (institution of higher education) could impact the academic (personal) identity. This notion of the communal layer interpenetrating with the personal level supports Lucas and Buzzanell (2006) claim that work-family scholarship focuses “either work or family, positioning these matters as separate anchors in a dichotomy” (p. 336). Therefore, identity scholarship needs to look at what happens when two communal identities, work and family, influence the personal identity simultaneously.

Despite these advances in studying interpenetration, identity scholarship has not addressed the impact of negotiating identity between the two personal identities of scholar and mother. Hecht’s research looks at between not within. Scholars’ earlier research examined within the layer penetration at the communal layer

(Symonds, 2012). Symonds (2012) deemed this term *intrapenetration*. *Intrapenetration* occurs when two identities compete and/or overlap within the same layer. For example, Symonds found that intrapenetration occurred when participants began to see that memories of their work-family began to occupy their minds when they were with their family-family.

Using CTI to explore identity and communication within a higher education context offers the opportunity to explore how historical narratives impact the enactment of personal identities. Specifically, we argue that the interpenetration or intrapenetration of communal and personal identities cannot be discussed without examining the cultural narrative of what is a mother and what is an academic. Our Mother and Scholar identities are influenced by the historical narrative society uses in enacting these roles. We ask:

RQ1: How do our narratives highlight the historical narrative of Mother and Scholar identities?

RQ2: How do these narratives influence the inter and/or intra penetration of the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layers?

### **Identity Gaps**

When frames of identity are not consistent with each other, identity gaps occur. Identity gaps are what humans experience when two parts of their identity are not consistent with each other (Jackson et al., 2019). It is because of this inconsistency that Jung (2004) introduced the Identity Gap Theory (IGT), which is used in tandem with CTI. Jung determined how one views how others think of them comes through in the others' communication. They, then, compare their self-view with a perceived view of others, resulting in identity gaps. There are discrepancies between our enacted identity and our perceived identity.

Previous exploration of identity gaps examines depression and international students (Amado et al., 2020) and social activism (Compton, 2019). Compton (2019) argues that activists perceive their personal layer as contradicting with the relational frame, or others' expectations of their identities. We contend that MotherScholars may experience identity gaps when their personal identity is enacted in a way that contradicts with the relational or communal frames.

Research (Amado, et al., 2020; Compton, 2019; Jung & Hecht, 2004, 2008) mainly focuses on identity gaps between layers; however, Colaner et al., (2014) determined that identity gaps can occur within layers as well. Specifically, Colaner et al. found gaps within the relational layer of identity for adult adoptees. Compton (2016) argues that instead of looking at identity gaps as a void

between layers, scholars should look at the identities as competing tensions. We argue that in higher education there is the expectation that women academics must keep their Mother and Scholar identities separate. But when COVID-19 forced the merging of work and family, our Mother and Scholar identities were at odds with each other. What happens when these two personal identities experience a “gap,” or the communal space provides a limit on what identity can be present (Compton, 2016). We argue that academia provides scholars, who are mothers and have children, limited space to negotiate between their mother and scholar identities. Some in academia find it “unprofessional” to have children present during a virtual conference or family may face resentment “because mom is working” and they can’t be present. To address this limited space, we ask:

RQ3: What identity gaps are revealed through the forced merging of family and academia during COVID-19?

### **Method**

This study is part of a larger project examining the MotherScholar dichotomy during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the larger project, we employed a combination of autoethnography, specifically interactive interviewing (Ellis, et al., 1997) and photovoice (Wang, 1999). Spradley et al. (2021) demonstrated this technique of blending photographic and verbal experiences, referring to the approach as collaborative interviewing.

Our rationale for this research design is to interactively produce texts for analysis. We used collaborative interviewing techniques to re-construct our experiences and to provide reflections on our maternal and scholarly roles. The interactivity was especially important as we enacted mother and scholar identities for one another through the collaborative interviews. By sharing our COVID-19 experiences with one another as researchers, we functioned as the participants. In our collaborative interviews, we asked probing questions or questions of clarification of each other so that each participant could dig deeper into their MotherScholar lived experiences.

### **Data Collection**

For this autoethnography, the researchers were also the *researchees*. Autoethnography allows researchers to “view themselves as part of the research – sometimes (the) focus – rather than standing outside” (Ellis, 2004, p. 3). We are five Caucasian females ranging in age from 39 to 47. We have 16 children total, ranging in age from 4 (3 at the time of the interviews) to 23. We represent the various levels of tenure-track and tenured, with 4

members being tenured and 1 tenure-seeking at 2 midwestern Universities within 2 areas of studies, education and communication.

Our primary method of data collection was through collaborative interviewing. Collaborative interviewing, like interactive interviewing, allows researchers to get “an in-depth and intimate understanding of people’s experiences with emotionally charged and intimate experiences” (Ellis, et al., 1997, p. 121). Whereas predecessors assumed an informal approach to the interactive, group interview process, we assumed a more formal approach designating one of us facilitator, developing an interview guide for each Zoom session, and recording and transcribing the Zoom sessions and chats as texts for analysis. The collaborative nature of the process positioned us in the roles of researchers and participants. Some may question how autoethnography can be collaborative in nature when the focus is not on the self; like Chang et al. (2012) argues, researchers can share their stories to seek the similarities and differences of their experience, such as us sharing our experiences of being both Mother and Scholar during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are then able to relate these joint experiences back to the sociocultural context of academia, family, and the pandemic.

Our process of interviewing occurred over a period of four weeks through Zoom, an interactive video conferencing tool to which all of the researchers had access. Furthermore, Zoom has two tools helpful to qualitative researchers; Zoom records the sessions and then transcribes the dialogue, although not perfectly. Three interactive interviews were held, averaging about 2 hours for each interview. After all the transcripts were generated, 311 pages of data were accumulated. We held a fourth zoom meeting 5 months removed from our last scheduled interactive interview. This meeting focused on life during the last five months of COVID-19. This interactive interview generated 52 pages of transcript and 2 pages of chat.

#### **Data Analysis**

Given that data analysis was an open and iterative process, we sought additional data related to identity gaps. For the fourth interactive interview transcript, coding honed in on the four layers of identity as defined by CTI: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. Segment-by-segment notations were made as to penetrating maternal and scholarly identities as well as to direct and indirect personal, enacted, relational, or communal layers of identity with attention to disconnects between or within layers indicative of identity gaps.

Answering this call, the following results are subdivided into sections that explore penetrating maternal and scholarly identities, to address research questions 1 and 2, and gaps between and within identity layers to address the third research question.

### Member Checking

At the completion of the early drafts of the findings, we elicited feedback from the remaining team members. This feedback functioned as member checking to ensure that the quotes selected and interpretations reflected in the findings section accurately portrayed each author's experience as MotherScholar in COVID-19. While some qualitative researchers use member checks as a procedural tool to enhance perceptions of credible and valid research (Morse et al., 2002), our use of member checks functioned more as research-oriented opportunities for feedback and revision and personally-oriented opportunities for relationship maintenance and social support between researchers. This is consistent with Thomas' (2017) observation regarding the varied ways member checks function in qualitative research.

### Findings

Diverging slightly from Colaner et al.'s (2014) developmental view of identity that draws heavily on Erikson's work, we argue that individuals are in a continual state of becoming themselves. Such a view is consistent with Hecht's (1993) work with the CTI, specifically the assumption that identity is emergent and socially enacted within the roles of the social hierarchy. With this understanding of emergent and socially enacted identity, we assert that when faced with change or crisis, individuals experience heightened awareness of their identity, identity gaps, and opportunities for critical reflection related to identity gaps; hence addressing research question 1. This study is, in part, a critical reflection of our MotherScholar identity gaps awakened by COVID-19 familial and professional conditions.

### Penetrating Identities

Our second research question sought to examine how our identities interpenetrated between the layers of personal, enacted, relational, and communal. Our analysis produced two themes: Between Penetration and Within Penetration.

*Between penetration: Merging of mother and scholar.* The first theme focuses on the penetration of our mother and scholar identities. From our perspective, enacting Mother and Scholar had varying degrees of compatibility and overlap prior to and during COVID-19 conditions.

**Chrissy:** One of the first days of homeschooling where I made them sit around the table and they were actually doing work, um..(edited for length) So at first, I was like okay, I'm going to be good, I'm going to sit down with them. I'm going to be with them. We're going to get through this because I thought it was possible.

**Elizabeth:** Well, we sat up one night 'til I think it was 5:30 am before we finished what we were working on and I was

like, I'm too old for this. But my kids, one of them was up before we went to sleep. And, he was like, "you're still working?" And, I felt like, you know that was not the best to have happen, but there was, I think, a realization of "my parents work really hard."

**Heather:** So that's kind of a cool convergence of work and motherhood, although that's not fair. It is the role of motherhood, yeah because motherhood totally and absolutely is what motivates me to work on (research). It's because I'm a mother.

**Lauren:** So for me, that's why I am really strategic about saying MotherScholar as one word because there's never a time when I'm not a mom and there's never a time I'm not a scholar, like I just am always those things. My way work does 18 hours, I'm telling myself. You're still a mom. The children are still on your brain.

These quotes are indicative of our MotherScholar COVID-19 identity mergers; and as we teased out and pressed into these mergers, we began to realize that rather than setting boundaries between the identities, we enact both identities simultaneously. The *mother* and the *scholar* identities penetrate. Hecht et al. (2003) examined interpenetration between four layers (personal, enactment, relational, and communal); our analysis found penetration occurring between the personal layer and the enactment layer; but deeper analysis demonstrated how penetration was occurring *within* the personal layer as well.

To best understand the differences in the penetration, interpenetration and *within* penetration will be explained further. Chrissy's description of working at the kitchen table with her children on their schoolwork demonstrates the between layer penetration. She enacted her mother identity (being with her children) by assisting them and making sure they all had what they needed for their schoolwork. By choosing to enact her mother identity, the overlap of the two layers, personal and enactment, occur.

We also see the enactment layer penetrating with the personal layer in Elizabeth's account of her son walking in on Elizabeth and her partner finishing a virtual work video. Her child was able to see how hard his parents work because he saw that they were enacting their professional side, doing the virtual conference video for work. Not all children are privileged to witness parents enacting the personal identity of academia, but COVID-19 opened this door for many of our children.

*Within penetration: Intrapenetration collisions of mother and scholar.* The second theme focused on the *within* layers of merging. *Within* penetration occurs when identities among one-layer overlap. *Within* layer penetration came to light in research conducted

with adult adoptees (Colaner et al., 2014) and military veterans (LeBlanc & Olson, 2015; Symonds, 2012) and is coined *intrapenetration*. Intrapenetration is “when identities operate cooperatively within one layer” (Symonds, 2012). For intrapenetration to occur, the personal identity of *mother* and the personal identity of *scholar* must collide with each other. This is evident in Heather’s and Lauren’s quotations. Heather points out that it is her identity as a mother that pushes her to be the academic. Lauren notices how being a mother drives her in how she interacts with her children but also how she is “mother” to her students. Lauren shared the story of assembling a virtual graduation for her students because, as a mother herself, she would want to celebrate the achievements of her children. Her mother identity *penetrates* her scholar identity. Lauren also shared how she would have her children interact with her students as part of the student-teaching assignments. In this instance, her *scholar* identity was penetrating her *mother* identity. While we did not feel our MotherScholar identity merge fully, we embodied an overall intrapenetration of *mother* and *scholar* as we found productive overlaps between these identities, and as evidenced in our COVID-19 research agendas featuring work that brought our maternal and academic identities together.

#### **Identity Gaps Between and Within Layers**

While the bulk of research on identity gaps examines gaps between layers (e.g. personal-relational), there is a call to extend identity gap research by exploring gaps between as well as within layers (Colaner et al., 2014). Our final research question asked what type of identity gaps we experienced during our Mother and Scholar identity negotiations. Our analysis found that we engage with both types of identity gaps: between layers and within layers.

*Personal-Relational.* The opposite of interpenetration is when there is a disconnect between the two identities and identity gaps manifest. We begin with identity gaps resulting between personal and relational identity. The identity gaps between the personal and relational identity layers are well documented, thus far, in the CTI research (Colaner et al., 2014); it is of note that our data also demonstrated a personal-relational gap. Our interactive interviews revealed that we had identity gaps between our personal MotherScholar expectations of ourselves versus what others, often our colleagues and administrators, had of us. Asking the coauthors, Sarah posted this question in the chat of our fourth interactive interview, “Does anyone else feel we have to put on a mask to our colleagues and show that we are a super MotherScholar?” Immediately, Elizabeth responded back, “Yes, and then I feel weird that I did it. But, then, I do it again.” Masking and acting appear in works related to emotional labor explaining discrepancies between felt and performed emotions connected to identity roles (see

Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1997). Similarly, the notion of masking appeared in our MotherScholar talk as we sought to make sense of the need we felt to perform one identity for our colleagues, administrators, or even families and another identity for ourselves.

The personal-relational MotherScholar gaps centered around our need to enact a “Professor Wonder Woman persona,” in Lauren’s words and “Super MotherScholar” in Sarah’s words, for our students, colleagues, and administrators; yet we know and understand that MotherScholar is an intra/inter penetrating identity that COVID-19 conditions have shifted what masks or personas are plausible for us to enact. Lauren comically commented that she was afraid to “tell [her] students that [her] kids lived in [her] home” as she worked and schooled her kids from home in Fall 2020. Similarly, Chrissy described her silence on motherhood issues in her all-male grant-related meetings, as if she were only scholar for this suspended moment in time and virtual space. It was not that Lauren and Chrissy were not MotherScholars with their students or male colleagues, but the personal-relational identity gaps generated a need, desire, or social pressure to project scholar. In response to the dynamic nature of coping with COVID-19 MotherScholar conditions, Chrissy and Sarah evoked a “roller coaster” metaphor as each documented change that upended their deadlines, plans, and schedules for the semester versus the realities of quarantining for two weeks, a COVID-19 death in the family, or a shift to remote work. In part, their roller coasters were emblematic of gaps between the personal identity of MotherScholar and the role expectations that their students, colleagues, or administrators had for them, which was evidenced for one researcher in an email regarding institutional leave policies.

In addition to the gaps between the personal and relational layers of identity, we noted gaps between personal and communal layers.

*Personal-Communal.* Because it is challenging for us to differentiate between our relational others, including our message exchanges, our roles, and our relational units, and the larger social groups to which we identify, we almost hesitate to discuss the personal-communal gaps. However, our interactive interviews tapped into the broader, social expectations placed on mothers and academics. Our overall sense from the example of other academics and the early research on COVID-19’s impact on academics, in general, and academic mothers in particular, is that there is understanding and accommodation for lowered productivity, especially with regard to research productivity. Yet, we felt the impetus to continue or exceed our pre-COVID-19 levels of productivity. Sarah explained, “Right now, if there is a grant opportunity on campus, I’m applying for it, and I’ve gotten two, and then, I have at least two publications this semester, but it seems like



nobody else...” Chrissy finishes her sentence, “is doing it.” As our universities offered extensions on tenure and promotion clocks or suspended certain criteria for review, we personally offered ourselves no extensions or suspensions. We applauded the academy’s efforts to empathize, especially with academics caring for dependents, even contributing to campus advocacy on the matter; but then, we personally disconnected ourselves from the academics that would need productivity-related accommodations. The disconnect between who we were as MotherScholars and the academic institutions with which we are affiliated were evident in our communication.

### **Identity Gaps Within Layers**

*Relational-Relational.* Identity gaps within the relational level occurred with regard to the different messages we (in)directly received regarding our MotherScholar identities. Featuring heavily in relational-relational gaps was the tension between the inter/intra penetrating *mother* and *scholar* identities among our different relationships. To illustrate, Heather explained that she observed MotherScholars “killing it” during COVID-19. She lamented the difficulty in communicating with others, especially male colleagues, what she wanted to do, which was, “You’re doing a tiny bit of work, and everyone else you know – all these other women, seriously moms – are doing so much work. It’s ironic. I know.” Then, she lamented that many of the MotherScholars she knew were not recognizing the quality and quantity of work they produced, thus far, in the pandemic. She explained what she wanted to say to the MotherScholars, “It’s kind of crazy to think about revising tenure and promotion guidelines based on this because the women that I know are killing it.” The tensions between these relational roles with colleagues, how academics see one another, and perceptions of productivity demonstrated that identity gaps within the relational layer are difficult to traverse and communicate.

With that said, relational-relational identity gaps were not confined to academic relationships, these gaps also extended to familial relationships. Elizabeth recalled a dialogue with her mom and in-laws in October of 2020, in which they asked, “How much longer do you plan on doing this?” They were referring to her workload as MotherScholar – double teaching overload, publication deadlines, kids doing remote school, and the like. They voiced what she admitted she had a hard time voicing herself, “This is unsustainable.” Work and life tensions alleviated somewhat in MotherScholar intrapenetrating identities remained high, stressing relational roles and the family unit.

*Communal-Communal.* Identity gaps within the communal level manifested in relationship to our perceived membership in maternal or parental groups and our membership in the academy. For example, Heather identified as an almost empty nester with her eldest

two daughters at college and her son in his senior year of high school. Given her son's involvement in swim and band, in a normal senior year with senior events, he would have left the house at 5:30 in the morning and not returned home until after 6:00 most evenings and until after midnight on Friday nights; but Heather describes how COVID-19 created a disconnect between her experiences as an almost empty-nester and the expectations associated with the group. She had anticipated slowly transitioning into her son's departure for college as he spent less and less time at home. Speaking of her son and the COVID-19 conditions that have them spending their days and evenings together, Heather remarks,

So, part of me says, yes, this sucks, but part of me is also like I am spending so much time with him. And I'm really glad for it, but also, it's kind of a mean trick. Because, it's going to make it worse when he leaves. I feel like if we had just kind of continued... (edited for length) it would be like we're sliding into [the empty nest]. Instead, it's like we're in this a lot more contact and a lot more interaction.

As an empty nester, a social group of parents marked by their children's and household status, Heather had mixed reactions to the difference between normal and COVID-19 senior year experience fully transitioning her to the social group.

In a different vein of communal-communal identity gaps, we behaviorally identified with the maternal social group termed intensive (Hays, 1996), scientific (Foss, 2010), or totalizing mothers (Douglass & Michaels, 2004; Wolf, 2011); nevertheless, we simultaneously identified as scholars who recognize the weaknesses of such cultural constructions with narrowed prescriptions for "good" mothering. These iterations of the communal-communal identity gap were expressed in an array of different statements regarding our expectations for "good" mothering. To illustrate, we all described extraordinary maternal work that we deemed necessary regardless of the skill level, time, or energy required to fulfill it. As the pandemic persisted into Fall 2020, our maternal efforts waxed rather than waned with remote schooling, homeschooling, or quarantining for periods of time. Even as second author Elizabeth edited an earlier version of the manuscript, she admitted: "I took a four-hour break to make layers of the earth with homemade playdough balls for eight fifth-graders." Sarah, the first author, found herself editing this manuscript while sitting next to her daughter during her virtual math lesson. We became activity directors, psychologists, snack dispensers, teachers (in a different sense than our college classes), and much more to our children all the while recognizing that this super human level of skill and effort were also "unsustainable." We bemoaned that women felt the need to put such burdens onto themselves to achieve an idealized and unrealistic enactment of

“good” mothering; and we, in our own unique ways, strove to be that “good” mother in a similar way that we strove to continue or exceed our scholarly production at pre-COVID-19 levels.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this project was to examine how the circumstances of COVID-19 impacted our mother and scholar identities. We grounded our research in Hecht et al. (2003) *Communication Theory of Identity*, specifically the interpenetration of identity layers, and Jung’s (2004) *The Identity Gap Theory*, particularly identity gaps. We proposed three research questions: RQ1: How do our narratives highlight the historical narrative of Mother and Scholar identities?; RQ2: How do our narratives highlight the interpenetration of the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layers?; And, RQ3: What gaps in identity are revealed through the forced merging of family and academia in COVID-19?

As a result of the analysis, we found that society’s master narratives of what it means to be a good academic and a good mother hung over us as we grappled with decisions, made choices, and survived during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We determined that how we communicate our Mother and Scholar identities is the result of the penetration between identity layers as well as within the identity layers. We determined that identity gaps were also experienced as a result of between and within penetration. In this section, we outline what our results mean, paying particular attention to research questions 2 and 3, and implications for future research.

#### **Inter/Intra Penetration**

For the second research question, we experienced the penetration of two of Hecht’s et al. (1993) layers but we also built upon the notion of intrapenetration, *within* layer penetration (Symonds, 2012). First, we experienced *between* layer penetration, or interpenetration. Specifically, we found the personal layer and enactment layer penetrating.

The interpenetration of the layers has been studied in a variety of diverse contexts. For example, Hecht et al. (2002) examined CTI in terms of how members of the Jewish culture (communal layer) identified with the Jewish culture (enactment layer) as portrayed on *Northern Exposure*. The impact of in-group vs. out-group conflict on personal and relational levels captured individuals faced with decisions on whether or not to reveal their religious identities (personal and communal layers) (Hecht et al., 2000). Our findings illuminate a new form of interpenetration between the personal and enactment layers expanding the usefulness of CTI and the concept of interpenetration.

Second, we found *within* layer penetration, or intrapenetration (Symonds, 2012) among the layers. Intrapenetration

occurs when identities merge within one layer of CTI, such as at the communal layer when military veterans return home from the theater (LeBlanc & Olson, 2015). Our study builds upon intrapenetration and determined that our Mother and Scholar identities penetrate *within* the personal level. This finding adds to the theoretical value of CTI and demonstrates how the theory continues to be testable and the heuristic nature of the theory.

### **Identity Gaps**

Our findings for the third research question highlight the usefulness of “identity gaps.” Specifically, our findings support Jung and Hecht’s (2004) research with identity gaps between the personal-relational layers and the personal-communal layers. Previous research found identity gaps occurring at the personal-enacted and personal-relationship levels (Drummond & Orbe, 2009; Jung et al., 2007; Wadsworth, et al., 2008). Our findings contribute to the existing research but also bring to light examples of identity gaps occurring between the personal and communal layers.

Second, the findings for the third research question contribute to new research on *within* layer identity gaps. Colaner et al. (2014) found identity gaps occurring within the relational layer; we heeded their call for research on *within* layer penetration. Our findings support identity gaps *within* the relational layer; but, our findings also support identity gaps occurring within the communal layer (Symonds, 2012). This finding exemplifies how we found it necessary to continue producing/working at the pre-pandemic levels but we also found it necessary to expose to others how well we mother.

### **Implications**

This study is foundational for future generations of MotherScholars and identity negotiation during large-scale crises. First, our findings support the call for higher education to continue to work to make campuses family-friendly (Yngvesson et al., 2020). Colleagues and administrators may not understand that there are home distractions over which MotherScholars may have no control. Just like some MotherScholars argue they are not given space on campus to be MotherScholars (Yngvesson et al., 2020), the summer and fall of 2020 demonstrated how many are calling for MotherScholars not to have the space to merge these identities in virtual spaces. Morris (2020) wrote, “arrange for family to stay out of the way. At many places, pets and children are no longer the cute intrusions they were in the early days of the pandemic” (online). Unrealistic expectations of virtual meetings absent a toddler waving to colleagues or dogs barking undermine family-friendly aims of higher education and unnecessarily generate stress on mothers to choose their scholar identity at the expense of being a good mother while working and schooling from home. As MotherScholars, we

understand the inconvenience these distractions may cause, which is why the researchers with younger children often made alternative arrangements for their children during our interactive interview sessions. But we also need places of higher education to see past us as just scholars. We are also mothers; there will be times when these distractions will just occur despite all our best planning. Family-friendliness extends beyond work arrangements that accommodate the interpenetrating mother and scholar identities to also develop cultures of acceptance and, dare we say, a celebration of the interpenetrating identities.

Second, this study highlights how MotherScholars manage to “make it work.” As Abetz (2016) points out, “women construct, adjust, embrace, and abandon goals” (p. 554). This is what we had to do, but we also did so despite the privilege we have in our respective roles. Only one member of the research team is pre-tenure. As a result of COVID-19, the administration presented the option to “pause” the tenure clock due to the interruptions COVID-19 might bring to research production. She turned down the pause. However, pausing the tenure clock should not be the only solution to addressing the struggles of the merging MotherScholar identities. Resources, such as providing work computers, postponing non-essential meetings, a reduction in course load, or even offering funds for professional development to teach successfully online (Darby, 2020), should be made available as ways to support MotherScholars. In other words, our repertoire of administrative accommodations should be as imaginative and complex as the situation demands to address a diversity of MotherScholar configurations – many of which are not highlighted in this research but are highlighted in a special issue of the *Journal of Motherhood Initiative* (2021).

Our study builds upon the theory that motherhood and academia clash (Gilbert & Von Wallmenich, 2014). With the introduction of COVID-19, our public and private spheres clashed (Kirby et al., 2003); the instability of motherhood merged with the stability of academia. Human resources and higher administration must remember these realities when scheduling virtual meetings for 8 in the morning and expecting MotherScholars to log in wearing a professional suit. During the climax of COVID-19 during the spring semester, many allowed these slips of unprofessionalism; however, many are now calling for professionalism when meeting via Zoom or other video conferencing tools (Morris, 2020). All academics, particularly MotherScholars, should be seen through their contributions to their departments, colleges, and universities, and not be discredited because their child(ren) interrupted meetings or due to less formal wardrobe choices.

Our interviews focused on how we managed our priorities during this pandemic. Nowhere in our narratives about

MotherScholar struggles did we mention, or question, what each other was doing for self-care. “Negotiating motherhood while conducting research simultaneously requires self-regulation and discipline” (Huopainen & Satama, 2018, p. 111). Human resources and higher administration should work to acknowledge these self-sacrifices and find ways to offer services, whether through the universities’ wellness program or an outside company, to provide self-care services or ideas to academic parents. During the editing of this manuscript, one member received an email from the administration with suggestions for “self-care” during the winter break; most of the suggestions centered on academic life. While we appreciate the tone of the message, the suggestions do not address the bigger picture of mothering and scholaring. We experience stress because of the overlapping of the work and family boundaries (Gilbert & Von Wallmenich, 2014); therefore, providing more practical resources for MotherScholars to seek out self-care will benefit not only the MotherScholar but also their students.

Finally, our findings contribute to the expansion of the Communication Theory of Identity as well as Identity Gap Theory. Jackson et al. (2019) contend the Identity Gap theory works in tandem with CTI. Our findings support this notion because without explaining the notion of penetration of identity layers, identity gaps would not be understood. Our use of the theory expands the usefulness of the theories outside the realm of communication. We also hope that higher education and society will understand how it isn’t a question of either/or for MotherScholars but rather both/and.

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## **Rumormonger? Whistleblower? Martyr?: How the U.S. and Chinese Media Framed the Narrative of COVID-19 Doctor Li Wenliang**

Zhenzhu Zhang and Steven J. Venette

*This study explores news stories regarding Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the first people who tried to raise the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, and eventually died from the disease. The way Dr. Li Wenliang was depicted in the media changed over time. Understanding how that depiction changed is important because it helps demonstrate how narratives function to frame crises. The current study uses framing and narrative theories to support thematic analysis. Observing how a narrative changes allows for a more nuanced perspective of how crises are communicated and understood by the community. Three major themes emerged from the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang both in China and the United States: rumormonger, whistleblower and politicized icon, and martyr. The findings identify internal and external sources of pressure that can cause the media to change their storytelling. This analysis suggests that, in the future, people like Dr. Li Wenliang, when framed as martyrs or heroes, can help the public deal with the confusion and uncertainty that surrounds a crisis.*

### **Introduction**

In December 2019, hospitals in Wuhan, China, started to receive patients with severe pneumonia symptoms that appeared to be a new form of disease (Lu, 2019, December 31). On December 30, 2019, as an ophthalmologist of Wuhan Central Hospital, Dr. Li Wenliang had seen a patient's laboratory report with startling results, and he started to notice a possible outbreak of SARS-like coronavirus (Li, 2020, January 31). Wuhan Central Hospital had been one of the key health facilities when COVID-19 first hit Wuhan, China (Green, 2020).

According to Li Wenliang's (2020, January 31) own post on the social media platform Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter), he had seen a patient's laboratory report with surprising results, noting "positive indicators of high confidence of SARS-like coronavirus" (para. 1) on December 30, 2019. In an attempt to warn his medical school alumni, Dr. Li Wenliang sent messages through his WeChat social media account, warning them about a possible outbreak of SARS-like coronavirus and encouraging them to protect themselves from infection. He wrote,

7 cases of SARS have been confirmed at Huanan Seafood Market. According to a patient's laboratory report, the main mode of transmission of the virus is

short-range droplet transmission. It can cause a type of special pneumonia that is obviously infectious. The patients are isolated in the emergency department of our hospital's Houhu campus. The latest news is that it has been confirmed as a Coronavirus, and they are currently analyzing the virus type. Don't circulate this information outside the group, tell your family and loved ones to take precautions. (Li, 2020, January 31, para. 1)

Although Dr. Li Wenliang was not trying to spread information about the virus to the general public, this is the first time the possibility of this virus was publicly shared with any suggestion of documentation. As with WeChat, many people in the group could see this post. It was very easy for Dr. Li Wenliang's message to be read and leaked, allowing it to spread, much like the virus it was reporting.

On January 3, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang was reprimanded by the local police for spreading rumors. After returning back to work, days later, Dr. Li Wenliang unfortunately contracted COVID-19 while treating one of his patients (Li, 2020, January 31). On February 6, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang died from the virus (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7).

Dr. Li Wenliang's death became a spotlight of news media in both China and the United States, drawing intense attention amid the global pandemic. The way Dr. Li Wenliang has been depicted in the media has changed over time and understanding how that depiction has changed is important. During crises, meaning is negotiated through the construction and exchange of narratives, and crises are understood and "lived" in terms of these frames (Venette, 2008, 2003). Dr. Li Wenliang's case highlights how narratives unfold over time, and how media narratives frame people's reactions during a crisis. While analysis of crisis narratives has been one focus of study for crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016), additional understanding is needed about how competing narratives interact – especially when they are intercultural.

The current study uses thematic narrative analysis of Dr. Li Wenliang's stories as they unfolded and also uses framing theory to help understand how, as the narratives change, people's understandings of the events also change. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the different media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang's story. In particular, the focus is on how and why the Chinese state media narratives changed over time.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Narrative Theory**

Humans are storytellers, and people's perception of the world is based on narratives they tell and hear (Fisher, 1984).

Braddock and Dillard (2016) defined a narrative as “a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters” (p. 447). In 1983, Kamler explained the importance of narrative and narrative theory as follows:

Any communication is a sharing of stories. Most stories seem to cry out to be shared. And getting shared is perhaps the most profound function of stories. Stories are the stuff of communication. And the sharing of them is what transforms persons into communal beings. In trading our stories back and forth for inspection, agreement, disagreement, we are involved in the activity of making ourselves members of a community. Public story trade is at the heart of the social miracle about persons. (p. 49)

Human beings construct their understanding of life experiences and actions through narratives. People understand the logic of events that happen in the world and figure out how to respond to these events through stories (Heath, 2004).

Fisher’s (1984) narrative theory is vitally important to the study of narration during crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Crises are social phenomena where people test ideas by interacting with others to determine if they are understanding the events correctly and are formulating individual and collective responses (Venette, 2008). As Heath (2004) notes, “crisis response entails the telling of a story—the enactment of a crisis narrative” (p. 175). Heath (2004) suggests that “telling a story is a culturally typical response to crisis” (p. 168). Heath considers narrative as one of the components of crisis communication. For Heath, the definition of crisis “is a narrative event that demands unique and strategically appropriate rhetorical enactments” (Heath, 2004, p. 175). Sellnow and Seeger (2013) also point out that “narrative theory views a crisis event as a developing story” (p. 181).

Clementson (2020) studied the impact of narratives in crisis communication using an experimental design under the theoretical framework of Fisher’s (1984) narrative theory and Heath’s (2004) theory of crisis response narratives. “The theory of crisis response narratives (Heath, 2004) holds that ethical narratives are effective because they enhance trustworthiness, attitudes toward the spokesperson, and identification with the spokesperson” (p. 1). Through an online experiment with 365 participating undergraduate students at a United States public university about a TV interview with a spokesperson answering questions from reporter during company crisis situation, he found that “ethical narratives are more effective than unethical narratives” (p. 1). While ethical communication is certainly preferred, an audience does not always

know if messages are open, honest, and trustworthy. People who saw Dr. Li's posts and the official responses were left to question the ethicality and veracity of the contradictory messages.

Seeger and Sellnow (2016) focus on the role narratives play during crisis communication, arguing that "much of the meaning, power, and ultimate impact of a crisis are functions of the ensuing network of narratives" (p. 9). They define blame, renewal, victim, hero and memorial as five different types of crisis narratives. Blame narratives mainly focus on the attribution of responsibilities during crisis. Renewal narratives emphasize a community's recovery from crisis. Victim narratives demonstrate damage and ruin resulting from crisis. Hero narratives focus on the positive role which leaders, first responders, or ordinary citizens play in the crisis. Last, memorial narratives emphasize how the community remembers the crisis and what lessons the community should learn from the crisis over the long term.

By applying experimental design, Brooke et al. (2020) studied the role crisis narratives play to impact the response of the public during a fictitious contagious public health crisis. Seeger and Sellnow's (2016) five types of crisis narratives were the theoretical frame of this study. Through a survey with 1,050 participating American adults about an imaginary highly contagious virus outbreak in 2018, they found that "crisis narratives positively affect public protective behaviors, emotional responses, assessments of information credibility, and attributions of crisis responsibility during a public health crisis" (Brooke et al., 2020, p. 344). While the focus was very similar to the COVID-19 outbreak, the study did not include competing narratives, nor was the study aimed at understanding how narratives change over time.

Crisis communication scholars found an interesting phenomenon that narratives during crisis often compete with each other. Heath (2004) argues that "the narrative of one group can be a counterstatement and perhaps a corrective to the narrative of another group" (p. 173). Seeger and Sellnow (2016) also contend that multiple crisis narratives from different parties result in competition, especially "those experiencing a crisis from a different ideological, cultural, or even physical standpoint may offer very different narratives" (p. 143). Narratives during crisis help organizations to communicate their own stories to the public and fill the communication void (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). However, if organizations fail to construct a primary narrative that is favorable to them, then the public may form their own storyline which is unfavorable to organizations (Zhao et al., 2018). Dr. Li's case entails a situation where narratives competed between his telling and the

official Chinese account, and the framing of the events in the American media created an additional narrative.

Venette, Sellnow and Lang (2003) analyzed the threat NHTSA faced during extensive media coverage of Firestone tire failures on Ford vehicles. They chronicled NHTSA's effort to create a secondary narrative to compete with the existing unfavorable narrative which "portrayed NHTSA as having continually failed to respond to the pattern of accidents that cost hundreds of lives" (p. 227). NHTSA's secondary or competing narrative actively reestablished "the narrative associated with its failure by creating an exigency for enhancing, rather than punishing, the organization" (p. 219). In general, Venette, Sellnow and Lang illustrated the role of metanarration during the reconstruction of crisis perceptions, finding that "organizations can resolve a crisis through secondary narration" (p. 224). The Chinese government response attempted to establish a secondary narrative as an alternative to both the initial telling and the American framing.

Yang, Kang and Johnson (2010) examined "which forms of crisis narratives can enhance audience engagement in crisis communication such as reduction of negative emotions" (p. 473) by conducting an experimental study. They proposed that "effective delivery of narratives can lead to audience emotional engagement" and such engagement "can create and enhance emotional support and mitigate negative emotions" (p. 473). The findings of their study show that "participants' negative emotions against the company in crisis were significantly reduced" (p. 486) through narratives meant for enhancement of public engagement. Dr. Li's case was highly emotionally charged, especially after his death. To be effective, framing of this story must account for the audience's emotional reactions.

#### **Framing Theory and News Media**

One of the most cited definitions of media framing states, Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Ott and Aoki (2002) explain that framing "looks to see how a situation or event is named/defined, and how that naming shapes public opinion" (p. 485). They expand on this definition and how it is accomplished by highlighting selectivity, partiality, and structure as three inherent biases in all storytelling. Selectivity is defined as what is included and excluded in the story, partiality is what is emphasized



and downplayed in the story, and structure refers to how the story formally plays out (Ott & Aoki, 2002).

People rely on media for information and access to local, national, and world events. This reliance on the media is important to address as news stories are essentially narratives and interpretations. By focusing on one aspect of an event and presenting it to an audience, media outlets construct reality. This construction operates by making certain aspects of stories more salient than others. This salience then “frames” (Carter, 2013, p. 1) an event and provides a reference point for viewers in which all subsequent information is judged.

Frames help organize facts, and facts take on meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame (Gamson et al., 1992). Frames provide references for the public about what is important, and the media has great power because of this. The perceived salience of a public issue will be directly related to the amount of coverage given to that issue by the mass media (Holz & Wright, 1979). Comparing narratives helps highlight differences in the way a crisis is framed. Such comparison helps show how different facts are used to construct a coherent story that resonates with an audience.

The abstract principles of framing are used by news media; doing so shifts the objective occurrence into a subjective event. In 2001, Reese summarized the abstraction of framing:

[A] frame is a moment in a chain of signification. As sources promote “occurrences” into “events,” as journalists define and seek out information that fits their organizing ideas, frames can help designate any number of moments when we can say that a certain organizing principle was operating to shape reality. These moments being fluid makes it risky for us to fix at one point in time that happens to be most visible, such as in a news story. (p. 15)

According to Kuypers (2009), “the bulk of news framing analysis research is derived from a social scientific orientation and it is grounded in quantitative assumptions” (p. 287). However, an additional aspect of framing regards rhetoric, both in everyday interactions and in more structured organizational domains. Rhetoric regards the manner in which one speaks as a means of communication or persuasion. When one considers the art of persuasion as a combination of context and language, one can see that the art of rhetoric relies heavily on framing. What elements are included in rhetoric—and just as importantly what elements are excluded—serve to frame arguments in specific ways and make some meanings more salient than others. Rhetoric thus plays a key element in how frames are defined in social environments (Carter, 2013).

Based on the theoretical framework of narrative theory and framing theory, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ: What were the Chinese state media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang's story, and did the narratives change over time?

Sub RQ1: How was the narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story initially framed in the Chinese state media?

Sub RQ2: What evidence existed that initial narrative had been rejected by the Chinese public?

Sub RQ3: How did the narratives in the Chinese state media change over time?

### Methods

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), if a researcher wants to explore "the life of an individual" and "tell stories of individual experiences" (p. 67), narrative research is the best choice. This study sought to reconstruct the major narratives surrounding Dr. Li Wenliang's case by conducting thematic analysis of media reports.

Bruner (1990) says that we appeal to memory by drawing upon the facts of the case as they were reported, and we appeal to notions of time by situating the analysis within a time period. This study examined news reports that appeared in four American mainstream news media and four Chinese state media over a period from January 2, 2020 to April 2, 2020. Dr. Li Wenliang is among one of eight people initially identified in the Chinese press as rumormongers. He came into the spotlight due to the exposure of his identity on January 2, 2020, and he was recharacterized as a "martyr" (para. 1) by Xinhua News Agency, on April 2, 2020.

For the purpose of equivalent examination of media depictions from both China and the U.S., four Chinese state media outlets, *People's Daily Online*, *The China Daily*, *Global Times*, and Xinhua News Agency, and four American mainstream news sources, *The New York Times*, CNN, *TIME*, and *FORTUNE* were examined. These media were selected because they are widely consumed news sources with international readership, and they covered Dr. Li Wenliang's story. Once the news outlets were chosen, the researcher performed a search by using key word "Li Wenliang" from the official websites of each news outlet to generate these news articles. Forty-five news articles in total were identified. After proofreading and screening these news articles, the researcher selected twelve news reports which most related to the narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang's story.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from the media accounts (as suggested by Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). Themes were identified through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). An iterative process was employed where initial themes were identified as they emerged from the data. Articles were read, and themes identified, on a thought-idea basis, with the latent or wider message of an article also considered as part of this analysis. In other words, articles were broken down by each separate idea, whether it was a sentence, paragraph, or long section. This thematic analysis was conducted across all 12 selected news reports.

Polkinghorne (1995) explained that researchers should identify themes that appear in multiple data sources. By doing so, scholars can be confident that these ideas were formative in establishing the overall narrative readers were constructing. In other words, the dominant macro-narrative readers have about an event is a reflection of these repeated, converged ideas (Anthony, 2013; Anthony, Sellnow, & Millner, 2013; Anthony & Venette, 2017).

The researcher functionally created a timeline of Dr. Li Wenliang’s case by using the media reports in chronological order and looked for the common themes generated from the data. The researcher wrote analytical memos to identify the overarching ideas and labeled by primary codes going through the news articles sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph. The researcher started grouping codes into themes when the number of primary codes quickly became overwhelming. The process of secondary-cycle coding leads to likely themes that answer the research questions in the following results section.

### **Results**

A thematic analysis of the media reports of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story both in the Chinese state media and the American media resulted in the following three major themes that emerged over time:

1. Rumormonger
2. Whistleblower and politicized icon
3. Martyr

These three themes describe the way that the different media narratives depicted Dr. Li Wenliang’s story and highlight how the Chinese state media narrative changed over time. The first theme reflects that the Chinese state media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger who tried to spread rumors that aroused panic and threatened the stability and safety of the society. Immediately following the primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang, the Chinese public refused to believe it, which was exacerbated by the depiction in the United States media. The U. S. media diverged from this initial

story told by the Chinese state media by stressing that the doctor acted heroically to protect others. The second theme portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon who tried to warn about the outbreak of COVID-19. Since the primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story had been rejected by the public, the Chinese state media had to adapt Dr. Li Wenliang's story. Over time, the third theme emerged which celebrated Dr. Li Wenliang as a martyr who sacrificed his own life in the interest of the public.

**Chinese Media Initial Framing: Rumormonger**

On December 31, 2019, Xinhua News Agency and other Chinese state media officially announced the outbreak of COVID-19. The initial narrative of the outbreak was carefully controlled. According to Xinhua News Agency (2019), health authorities identified 27 pneumonia cases found in Wuhan as "viral pneumonia" (para. 1) which is totally preventable and under control, claiming "there were no clear signs of human-to-human transmission" (para. 5) and "no medical staff has reported infections" (para. 6).

On January 2, 2020, according to Xiao (2020, January 2) from the People's Daily Online (the original text in Chinese),

1日下午，武汉市公安局官方微博发布消息称，关于武汉市肺炎疫情的情况，8名散布谣言者，已被依法查处。

近日，武汉部分医疗机构发现接诊了多例肺炎病例，武汉市卫健委就此发布了情况通报。但一些网民在不经核实的情况下，在网络上发布、转发不实信息，造成不良社会影响。公安机关经调查核实，已传唤8名违法人员，并依法进行了处理。(第一、二段)

Author's translation into English:

On January 1, 2020, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau published information through its official social media platform Weibo and claimed that eight people who spread rumors regarding the current situation with the pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan have been investigated and dealt with legally.

Recently, some health facilities in Wuhan have diagnosed a number of pneumonia patients, Wuhan Municipal Health Commission published briefings regarding this. However, some internet users have posted and forwarded misinformation on the Internet without verification, causing adverse social impact. After investigation and verification, local police have reprimanded eight lawbreakers. The police will investigate and deal with all illegal acts that fabricate and spread rumors and disrupt

social order. Acts like these will not be tolerated. (Xiao, 2020, January 2, para. 1-2)

The Chinese state media widely covered this news. The initial narrative generated from the Chinese state media reports portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger who spread misinformation that threatened the stability of society. These eight rumormongers had attracted public attention. In fact, these eight people were not ordinary people; they were all doctors. Dr. Li Wenliang became important to the narrative due to the exposure of his identity.

On January 3, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang was called to the local police station in Wuhan and was made to sign an official statement in which he was accused of an “illegal act” of “publishing fictitious discourse” that has “severely disrupted social order” (Li, 2020, January 31, para. 1). According to the statement Dr. Li Wenliang (2020, January 31) posted on the social media platform Weibo, he was reprimanded. He posted, “The Public Security Bureau hopes that you will cease illegal behavior. Can you do this? If you are stubborn, refuse to repent, and continue to conduct illegal behavior, you will be punished by the law! Do you understand?” Dr. Li Wenliang wrote down his answers of “Yes” and “Understood” and signed his name with his fingerprints on it.

The primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang framed by Chinese state media was as a rumormonger. However, as uncovered by future events, this primary narrative had been rejected by the public after Dr. Li Wenliang eventually decided to accept media interviews and spoke to the public about his own story.

#### **Rejection of Initial Narrative**

Dr. Li Wenliang returned to work as normal after signing the statement required by the police. Not long after, he contracted COVID-19, apparently from a patient who had unknowingly been infected with the coronavirus. On January 10, Dr. Li Wenliang developed a cough, and on January 11, he had a fever. On January 12, he was hospitalized; on February 1, he tested positive for COVID-19 and was officially diagnosed (Li, 2020, February 1).

On February 7, China Daily officially announced that Dr. Li Wenliang passed away from the virus (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7). However, the exact time of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death is controversial. According to China Daily’s report, on the evening of February 6, some Weibo posts said that Dr. Li Wenliang had died of COVID-19. These posts started to go viral on Chinese social media, “sparking immense sorrow and outrage of netizens” (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7, para. 10). However, at 12:38 am on February 7, Wuhan Central Hospital, Dr. Li Wenliang’s workplace, denied his death through an official Weibo post by saying that Dr. Li Wenliang

was still “under emergency treatment” (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7, para. 12).

When Dr. Li Wenliang’s death was officially announced, an online protest broke out on Chinese social media (Yuan, 2020, February 7). The Chinese public refused to believe the initial narrative framed by the Chinese state media which labeled Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger. Dr. Li Wenliang’s death triggered an outpouring of mourning and rage on Chinese social media (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7). The New York Times reported that “the deluge of mourning and anger at the death of the doctor, Li Wenliang – from the same virus he was reprimanded for mentioning – at times overwhelmed China’s sophisticated censorship and propaganda systems. Many on social media called the doctor a martyr and a hero” (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 3).

Since the late night of February 6, countless messages expressing grief at Dr. Li Wenliang’s death and outrage over labeling him as a rumormonger were posted by Chinese netizens with different backgrounds, including Chinese state media leaders, well-known entrepreneurs as well as ordinary netizens (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7; Yuan, 2020, February 7). Hong Bing, the Shanghai bureau chief of People’s Daily, posted on her WeChat:

We are angry that your warning was treated as a rumor, and we mourn that your death was not a rumor. . . . You have never been related to rumors, but you have been forced to commit repentance for spreading rumors. Refusing to listen to your whistling, your country has stopped ticking, and your heart has stopped beating. . . . How big a price do we have to pay to make you and your whistling sound louder, to reach every corner of the East? (Hong, 2020, February 7, para. 1)

Chinese social media have been filled with emojis of candles and whistles, Dr. Li Wenliang’s words and images (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7). One Weibo user, Gong (2020, February 7) pointed out that the best mourning is reflection, and she expressed her anger by questioning, “Who had such great power to prevent doctors from telling the truth? Our country is paying great price now! You owe Chinese people an explanation” (para. 4).

Tens of thousands of netizens flooded into Dr. Li Wenliang’s Weibo to speak of their grief and condolences and started to call him as a hero and a martyr who sacrificed his life for ordinary Chinese people (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7; Yuan, 2020, February 7). Gradually, Dr. Li Wenliang’s Weibo became a “wailing wall” in China, evoking “the Western Wall in Jerusalem where people leave written prayers in the cracks” (Yuan, 2020, April 13, para. 4). More than one year later, netizens still leave messages on Dr. Li Wenliang’s last post, although they know that there will be no

response from him, telling him about their remembrances and daily lives. Some messages read, “I am still remembering when I got the news that you passed away last year, I cried all night” (Sunny, 2021, February 25) and “Dr. Li, I received my first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine today. Spring is coming. I wish that you are doing well in heaven” (BlackPearl, 2021, February 25).

Dr. Li Wenliang’s death and emergence as a tragic figure during the pandemic became an important turning point for the Chinese government where events could have worsened if the Chinese government did not respond appropriately. The outcry of the Chinese public likely would continue if the narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story remained the same. Therefore, it was a strategic opportunity for the Chinese government to meet the needs of the public and to increase the effectiveness of its communication. This critical moment in time also aroused intense international media attention. The narrative told by the American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon as well as a victim of the Chinese political system. His persona became a symbol of the lack of freedom of speech in China.

**Reframing: Whistleblower and politicized icon.** The next recurring theme was that American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang, following his death, as a whistleblower who tried to sound the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19 and was arrested or detained by local police. For example, the story of Li Wenliang by FORTUNE claimed that “Li was detained by local Chinese authorities and forced to recant his warning” (“World’s 25 Greatest Leaders: Heroes of the Pandemic”, 2020, para. 1). CNN journalists Xiong, Alam, and Gan (2020, February 6) also claimed that “Li was among a number of supposed ‘rumormongers’ detained in December for spreading news about the virus” (para. 4). The New York Times journalists Buckley and Mozur (2020, February 7) also mentioned Dr. Li Wenliang’s arrest by local police by citing his quotation: “‘I felt I was wronged, but I had to accept it,’ he said of his arrest. ‘Obviously I had been acting out of good will’” (para. 32). “World’s 25 Greatest Leaders: Heroes of the Pandemic” (2020) even celebrated Li Wenliang as one of the “heroes of the pandemic” in the headline and ranked him as number one of “World’s 25 Greatest Leaders” which included Angela Merkel, Lee Hsien Loong and Leo Yee-Sin, Anthony Fauci, Bill Gates, and Jack Ma.

Dr. Li Wenliang, following his death, was identified as a victim of the Chinese political system. New York Times columnist Li Yuan described Dr. Li Wenliang as a victim of the Chinese government, “an authoritarian government that allows for little dissent” (para. 3) which was “trying to control the message” (para. 8). Likewise, TIME journalist Leung (2020, February 7) framed Li Wenliang as the

“whistleblower doctor” who is “an eternal hero” in the headline, who insisted on fighting against the Chinese political system:

And yet Li was not dissuaded. He shared his ordeal online and carried out interviews with journalists through text message, conveying a picture of incompetence and mishandling of the virus at the crucial, initial stage of the outbreak. His insistence on speaking out defied a political system that does not tolerate dissent. (para. 4)

Calling for freedom of speech is considered one of Dr. Li Wenliang’s primary legacies according to American media. One portrait of Dr. Li “turned the outlines of Dr. Li’s surgical mask into barbed wire” (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 20), and this image became very popular on the social media platforms. CNN journalists Xiong, Alam, and Gan (2020, February 6) cited Dr. Li Wenliang’s well-known quotation, “I think a healthy society should not only have one kind of voice” (para. 15) in order to frame him as a symbol of freedom of speech in China. Similarly, Buckley and Myers (2020, February 1) framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a critic of information suppression by Chinese authorities, requesting more open and transparent information disclosure, by citing his quotes that “If the officials had disclosed information about the epidemic earlier, I think it would have been a lot better. There should be more openness and transparency” (para. 66). Besides this, American media also connected Dr. Li Wenliang’s death with the Chinese government. For instance, The New York Times journalists Buckley and Mozur (2020, February 7,) considered Dr. Li Wenliang’s death “a new test for China’s leader, Xi Jinping, who was already facing deep political problems — over a newly signed trade deal with Washington, Taiwan’s recent election and Hong Kong’s protest movement — before the virus spilled out of Wuhan” (para. 6). Similarly, CNN commentator Bociurkiw (2020, February 8) considered Li Wenliang as “China’s hero doctor” (para. 1) and linked his image to the politicized icon of the Tiananmen Square tank man in 1989 against government protests. Bociurkiw (2020, February 8) explained that Dr. Li Wenliang’s death “has unleashed an unprecedented tsunami of grief and anger that probably has not been seen since President Xi Jinping rose to power” (para. 7). So, during this time, Dr. Li Wenliang was being portrayed by American media as a whistleblower. He began to emerge as a political figure representing the people who have worked behind the scenes to respond to the pandemic. Thus, Dr. Li Wenliang’s story was used symbolically to represent a larger political idea.

Evidence was also growing that a significant portion of the Chinese people was rejecting the initial portrayal of Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger. The depiction of Dr. Li Wenliang as a political hero at this critical period of Sino-American relations increased



pressure on the Chinese government, through state media, to alter its framing of the story of Dr. Li Wenliang. Lack of effective response risked increased public criticism, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, the Chinese state media had to take swift action to shift their narrative by retelling Dr. Li Wenliang's story. A successful retelling would have to recognize the popularity of Dr. Li Wenliang and his actions for Chinese people and attenuate the criticism coming from the American media.

Fortunately, the Chinese government was able to reconstruct the narrative to frame Dr. Li as a hero, which was congruent with both the Chinese popular opinion and the Western media's perspective. Buckley and Mozur (2020) concluded, "Unable to fully expunge the discussions, Beijing has turned to state media to transform Dr. Li into a loyal soldier aligned with the government's cause" (para. 10). The official framing of Dr. Li Wenliang clearly shifts from the initial construction.

#### **Retelling of the Initial Narrative: Martyr**

After his death on February 7, the narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang gradually transformed from rumormonger into martyr from social media to official mainstream media in China. American media also noticed that Chinese state media turned to "transform Dr. Li into a loyal soldier aligned with the government's cause" (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 11). For example, China's state media Global Times released its own remembrance to Li Wenliang in its editorial on February 7. "Opinion: Salute Dr. Li Wenliang" (2020) praised that Dr. Li Wenliang, who tried to warn fellow doctors about COVID-19 when it first emerged in Wuhan, had shown his professionalism as a doctor. "Doctors are soldiers in the outbreak of infectious disease, hospitals are the battlefield, we feel heartbroken for his death in line of duty" ("Opinion: Salute Dr. Li Wenliang", 2020, February 7, para. 3).

The initial narrative had been rejected by the public, and thus the official mainstream media in China started to change the narrative. The initial narrative shift did not ease the public's outrage, and they continued to seek the truth of Dr. Li Wenliang's death. The Chinese government reacted very swiftly to the public's concerns related to Dr. Li Wenliang's case. Buckley and Mozur (2020) noted that "it is rare for the Communist Party to react so swiftly to public outrage. Several top officials and state media outlets had joined in the chorus mourning Dr. Li's death. In statements online, the National Health Commission and the Wuhan government said they had expressed their condolences" (para. 19). On February 7, at noon, according to the State Supervisory Committee (2020, February 7), a one-line statement on its website explained that in order to investigate the circumstances surrounding Dr. Li Wenliang's death, the State Supervisory Committee has "decided to send an

investigation team to Wuhan, Hubei Province, to conduct a comprehensive investigation on related issues reported by the public about Dr. Li Wenliang” (para. 1).

On March 19, the State Supervisory Committee released the press briefing regarding the investigation of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death through Xinhua News Agency. Following the alternative narrative found in the American media, Dr. Li Wenliang was now framed as a martyr or eternal hero. However, unlike the American depiction of Dr. Li Wenliang as trying to challenge the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government, Zhao (2020, March 19) pointed out that this part of the story was not the truth. The public was reminded that Li Wenliang was a “member of the Communist Party of China,” not an “anti-government figure” (para. 27). The state media referred to the American framing, providing evidence of its relevance, but explained that Western countries’ efforts intending to make use of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story to attack the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government will not succeed (Zhao, 2020, March 19).

Countering the popular narrative of the American media, China Daily journalists Zhou and Jiang (2020, February 7) emphasized that although “Li and the seven others were summoned by Wuhan police for ‘spreading fake information on the internet,’ they were reprimanded but not fined or detained, the police said. Li continued his normal work at the Wuhan hospital until Jan 10 when he came down with a cough and fever, symptoms of the coronavirus” (para. 7-8). Wuhan police published a post on its official Weibo social media platform and formally offered a “solemn apology” (para. 1) to his family and revoked the admonishment of him around 8 pm on March 19 (Wuhan Public Security Bureau, 2020, March 19). On April 2, Xinhua News Agency (2020) Liu (2020, April 2) published that Li Wenliang and fourteen frontline health care providers who died from COVID-19 were identified as the first batch of “martyrs” (para. 1) by Hubei Province People’s Government. The Chinese state media was able to swiftly change the narrative after initial public refutation through the retelling of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story. The secondary Chinese press narrative successfully became the dominant narrative in China over time because it comported to the public’s interpretation of events.

### **Discussion**

Narratives that operate across a broad audience become even more complex during the crisis (Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). COVID-19 has been an unprecedented public health crisis subject to multiple interpretations. The purpose of the current study was to explore, using narrative and framing theories, the media narratives regarding Dr. Li Wenliang. Additionally, the investigation examined the change in the narrative of the Chinese state media over time.

These results revealed that researchers can track dynamic crisis-related narratives over time. Because crises are dynamic, communication scholars should not view a narrative as a fixed series of static events. Communication scholars should not look at narratives as something that happens in a vacuum, because narratives are not only changing, but are also contextual. In an attempt to protect the public, the state media depicted Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger. However, the public believed that Dr. Li Wenliang was trying to protect the public. Instead of rejecting Dr. Li Wenliang's depiction as a hero, the state media coopted the alternative telling of events into its own narrative. Instead of being ingrained as a symbol of a government failure, Dr. Li Wenliang became as a martyr a model citizen who reflected collectivist values and efforts. The state media's metanarration (see Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003) successfully re-explained events and sought to deflect blame away from the Chinese government.

The findings of this study also highlight how narratives can compete with one another. When crisis narratives conflict people must resolve these inconsistencies (Anthony, 2013; Anthony, Sellnow, & Millner, 2013; Anthony & Venette, 2017). Consistent with Seeger and Sellnow (2016), different parties may provide multiple crisis narratives in terms of different ideologies, cultures, or even physical viewpoints. Through thematic analysis of media reports from four Chinese state media and four American media sources that covered Dr. Li Wenliang's story, it is evident that the state media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a troublemaker who tried to spread rumors against the collective good. The mainstream media in the United States portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon who tried to warn about the outbreak of COVID-19. This clash of narratives, along with the Chinese public's dissatisfaction with the initial depiction, created a decisive moment for the Chinese government. Without careful retelling of events, criticism would have remained or increased.

The way people understand a crisis is largely based on the way those events of the crisis are being narrated by the media. Joye (2010) points out, "News carries a unique signifying power, a power to represent events in particular ways" (p. 598). Results of this study suggested that the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang's story in Chinese and American media were initially totally different. Chinese media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger, while the American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon. The primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story was quickly rejected by the Chinese public. Finally, the Chinese media generated an alternative telling of Dr. Li Wenliang's story which celebrated him as a martyr.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Framing and narrative theory provided an excellent lens for analysis of the competing stories in this case. Communication scholars have illustrated that narratives are how people make sense of the world around them (Fisher, 1987). Narratives are particularly important during a crisis because events are articulated as stories (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Framing theory has been used to show how the construction of a story influences the audience's understanding of the events. However, Dr. Li Wenliang's case contributes to framing theory by demonstrating that when a series of events are framed in a manner that is inconsistent with their strongly held beliefs, the public will likely reject that narrative. Thus, framing lacks persuasive power when the suggested narrative is contrary to people's experiences or beliefs.

This case also highlights that the Chinese government was wise when it reframed its initial telling of the story. The government successfully reduced criticism by reconstructing the narrative that was consistent with public sentiments and responsive to alternative framing, such as American media depictions. The government's response reinforces the idea that crises are dynamic, and thus communicators need to be able to retell the story while accounting for new information and perspectives.

The thematic analysis of this study also identified how both internal and external (international) sources of pressure can cause the media to change their storytelling. The findings of this study suggested that internal sources of pressure, such as online protests on Chinese social media, helped to communicate that the Chinese public did not accept the initial narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story. External sources of pressure coming from media sources outside of China also indicated that the initial telling of Dr. Li Wenliang's story was not entirely accepted as accurate. Few other studies have identified these sources of pressure that have caused media to change their storytelling.

The major limitation of this study is only four news sources from the United States and four news sources from China were used. Certainly, other news sources could have been analyzed. Also, only American news media were examined representing international pressure. Other external sources could provide meaningful insights. Hence, future study could use news media from other countries as well. Regardless, the sources included in this study were sufficient to articulate the major themes depicted in the media of both countries.

Future research should test to see whether the same or similar process of adapting narratives within the Chinese media holds true in other countries. Other crisis cases within China also deserve attention to see if similar findings will emerge. Other stories have been told differently outside of China, putting pressure on the

Chinese news sources to change how they report about a particular crisis case. Media reports about protests that took place in Hong Kong may be a prime example.

Dr. Li Wenliang was an important figure during the emergence of COVID-19. By examining Dr. Li Wenliang's case, a better understanding of how crisis narratives work can be gained. This analysis provides an understanding of how the news media construct narratives during a crisis. Hopefully, this thematic narrative analysis will assist government entities and news agencies in learning how to deal with an emergent crisis like COVID-19. In the future, people such as Dr. Li Wenliang should not have to suffer or be falsely accused in order for their information to be seen as valuable.

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## Watching the Watchdogs: Online News Commenters' Critiques of Journalistic Performance During Terrorist Attacks

Ioana A. Coman

*This international comparative analysis explores what categories the public uses to evaluate the media performances of American and French journalists and media covering terrorist attacks. Specifically, the study looked at the Boston Marathon bombing (2013), and the Paris (Bataclan) terrorist attacks (2015), and the related online news stories comment sections of The New York Times and Le Figaro. The online comments of each news story were examined through a qualitative content analysis. The study shows that in a time of crisis commenters both appreciate and criticize journalistic performance and make direct demands to the journalists and editors. When applying journalistic norms and values to their critiques (criticism, plaudits, direct demands), commenters tended to fall with two categories - puritans and realists. They either drew from the ideal journalistic norms that should be upheld no matter what or judged journalistic performance through the lenses of the current context of the crises. Similarities and differences between the two countries and cases are also discussed.*

### Introduction

With the increased online presence of media outlets, audiences now have the means to actively participate in the media process, as “the media increasingly is becoming ‘something to do’ rather than just something to watch” (Syvertsen, 2001, p. 319). Online platforms and applications make it possible for audiences to instantly react to journalists’ news stories via online comments left on the media organization’s online and social media pages and interact with each other. Consequently, the boundaries between professional media producers (journalists, editors, etc.) and their content’s recipients (audiences) no longer have strict and clear past demarcations (Almgren & Olson, 2015; Craft et al., 2015; Domingo et al., 2008).

The news environment is more and more competitive and diverse. Media outlets constantly try engaging their users and offering spaces to comment on the news “has been one of the most consistent and widely implemented strategies” (Ksiazek, 2016, p. 1). Numerous studies approached the participatory journalism phenomenon and the online comments form of audience participation. Scholars have examined the positives and negatives regarding online comments from normative and practical perspectives, from the media outlet and its public’s lenses.

Practitioners and academics still debate issues such as the legitimacy and utility of online comments (e.g., a form of the public sphere; power relationship between producers and users; best ways for journalists to tackle this). At the same time, some convergence points emerge:

- 1) Online news comment fields remain the most prevalent form of audience participation used nationally and internationally (Krebs & Lischka, 2017; Løvlie et al., 2017; Nielsen, 2012; Weber, 2014; Wright et al., 2019).
- 2) Readers use news comments to voice their thoughts and emotions, seek and add information, and correct inaccuracies/misinformation (Ksiazek, 2016; Ksiazek et al., 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015).
- 3) Journalists still have mixed feelings about the comment fields and their engagement (Chen & Pain, 2016). Still, there is some evidence for the increase in online commenters' demands for journalists to participate in the comment sections actively and the positive effects of participation on the commenters' discourse quality (Ksiazek, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2018; Wolfgang, 2018).

The current study explores a crucial aspect: what categories the public uses to evaluate media performances. Do they apply the journalistic cultural capital - professional and social norms when judging/criticizing journalistic work, craving 'traditional' quality journalism (Craft et al., 2015)? Or is the public only at the level of "proto-professionalization" (Teurlings, 2017), mixing professional categories with values and representations derived from popular culture? The current study thus highlights how readers evaluate journalistic performance. In other words: how are readers in turn watching and judging those supposed to be the "watchdogs" of society, and what, if anything, are they asking in return?

Moreover, given that readers engage with the comments section to satisfy their need for information seeking, offering, correcting details, expressing emotions, and voicing their thoughts about journalists and the media's job of reporting, a crisis might offer the best context to study this phenomenon. In a crisis (such as a terrorist attack), media play a central role, as the public seeks information about what is happening, why, who is responsible (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Numerous studies examined how media, online commenters, or both frame crises (Liu, 2010; Valentini & Romenti, 2011) and, more generally, on different aspects of the online commenting phenomenon (Almgren & Olsson, 2015). However, the literature focusing specifically on commenters' reactions and thoughts about the media covering a crisis and the number of international comparative studies examining this type of

user-generated content (i.e., online comments) are seemingly scarce (Naab & Sehl, 2016). Consequently, this study aims to fill some of these gaps by exploring American and French readers' thoughts about the journalists and media covering such events. Specifically, it explores the Boston Marathon bombing (2013), and the Paris (Bataclan) terrorist attacks (2015), and the related online news stories comment sections of *The New York Times* (NYT) and *Le Figaro* (LF). Next, you will find a review of the relevant literature, an overview of the research questions and method, followed by the study's findings, and finally, the discussion and conclusions sections.

### Literature Review

#### Journalism and Online Commenting

The participatory journalism phenomenon marked by the newly gained abilities of users to generate content has become a popular research focus within the communication and journalism frameworks (Domingo et al., 2008; Naab & Sehl, 2016; Wright et al., 2019). Many studies exploring online comments within a journalistic framework come from three main perspectives: producer, 'prod-user,' and both (Almgren & Olsson, 2015, p. 3).

On the producer side, studies focused on how media professionals perceive and deal with online comments and commenters. Nielsen (2012) investigated how anonymous online comments affected journalists and how they think about and do their jobs. Journalists wishing to maintain control over news production refuse the mutual shaping of news with users due to their professional expertise (Nielsen, 2014). Hanusch & Tandoc Jr. (2017) evaluated the extent of commenters' influence on the journalists' perceived role, and Løvlie et al. (2015) studied the editorial control impact over commenters' attitudes. Journalists read comments, and some respond at least occasionally, seeing comment engagement as part of their job or as a conversation tone-setter and comments quality improvement tool (Chen & Pain, 2016, p. 1; p. 4).

From a prod-user perspective, most studies remain rooted in the public sphere's normative debate: focusing on the quality and characteristics of the discourse and debates emerging through these online news comments. Loke (2013) argued that these online news readers' comments have emerged as new public spheres. Ruiz et al. (2011) analyzed comments posted on the pages of national online newspapers in five countries, applying the normative perspective of Habermas' discursive ethics to assess their quality. They proposed two models of audience participation: communities of debate (argumentative, respectful discussions, mark different points of view) and homogenous communities (more emotional rather than argumentative debates). Several studies followed the relationship between civility and incivility, especially the impact of incivility on commenters and journalists (Coe et al., 2014; Ferenčík, 2017;

Prochazka et al., 2018; Reader, 2012; Santana, 2015; Springer et al., 2015; Suh et al., 2018).

Scholars explored why people even engage in online commenting. Ksiazek et al. (2014, p. 3) found three primary motivations: information seeking, socialization/social interaction, and entertainment. Others found that online commenters wanted to participate in journalism and engage in discussions with other users (Houston et al., 2011; Rowe, 2015; Springer et al., 2015). Users comment on interesting and emotion-arousing stories, and they are significantly more likely to comment on stories about political topics (Ksiazek, 2016; Stroud et al., 2016). Inspired by social psychology, others tried to identify the correlation between types of comments, motivations, and personality traits (Barnes et al., 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2017).

#### **Online news comments as media performance evaluations**

Despite this burgeoning bibliography on comments, few looked at users' evaluations of media performance. If Teurlings (2017) considers users' comments as a "proto-professional" media analysis, Kaun (2014) and Craft et al. (2015) argue comments are a form of press criticism. Analyzing two years of online comments on the ombudsman columns of three national news organizations, Craft et al. (2015) found that commenters applied professional (journalistic) and social norms of behavior when judging or criticizing journalistic work. Namely, they argue: "This emphasis on traditional journalism values had a nostalgic feel, as though the commenters were asking for a return to a time when their criticisms would not have been warranted" (Craft et al., 2015, p. 8). Regarding criticisms grounded in social norms, commenters think journalists are "being too judgmental," lazy/sloppy, using their leadership role for "nefarious ends," and negatively stereotyping the subjects of their news stories (Craft et al., 2015, pp. 9-10). Thus, commenters appear to be championing the traditional norms rather than challenging them. While they criticize journalists and contest some of their practices, they do not contest the traditional journalistic cultural capital.

#### **Journalism during crises and online news comments**

The concept of crisis has been widely researched within the communication field. A crisis can be defined as a "major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products, services or good name" (Fearn-Banks, 1996, p. 1). Crises disrupt social order and create high levels of uncertainty (Downing, 2002). Terrorist attacks have all the characteristics of a crisis (Canel & Sanders, 2012, p. 450). The public's need for information-seeking drastically rises. Thus, the media play a central role (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 138). Moreover, journalists become more than an information source in a

crisis involving national interests, serving as a guiding and consoling source (Schudson, 2011). In such times “people seek causes and make attributions” (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, p. 97), and media frames influence perceptions (Coombs, 2006). Consequently, many research studies looked at how crises, including terrorist attacks, were framed/interpreted by the media, online commenters, or both (An & Gower, 2009; Liu, 2010; Valentini & Romenti, 2011). Løvlie et al. (2017) explored user experiences with editorial control in comments after the 2011 terror attacks in Norway (p. 1). Scholars investigated the Boston and Paris terrorist attacks focusing on the relationship between media coverage and political agenda (Galily et al., 2016, Ginesta et al., 2017, Topinka, 2016), or the specific media coverage in such situations (Allan, 2014, Landivar et al., 2016, Guibet Lafaye, 2017, Sutton et al., 2015). Jenkins & Tandoc Jr. (2017) analyzed the online debates over using Tsarnaev’s picture on the *Rolling Stone* cover. Thus, the literature focusing on commenters’ reactions and thoughts specifically about this media coverage is seemingly scarce.

#### **Research Questions and Method**

This study follows the line of research proposed by Craft et al. (2015), aiming to add to the literature about online commenters’ evaluations of media organizations and journalism practices when covering crises (i.e., terrorist attacks) and offering an international comparative focus. Consequently, it explores what American and French readers said about the journalists and media coverage of the 2013 Boston (marathon bombing) and 2015 Paris (Bataclan) terrorist attacks in the related online news stories comment sections of *NYT* and *LF*. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1a: What are the forms through which commenters judge journalistic and media performance in the online comment sections of *NYT* and *LF* stories about the Boston terrorist attack?

RQ1b: What are the forms through which commenters judge journalistic and media performance in the online comment sections of *NYT* and *LF* stories about the Paris terrorist attack?

RQ1c: What similarities/differences exist between these kinds of evaluative statements made by *NYT* and *LF* commenters about journalistic performance when covering the terrorist attacks?

RQ2: What journalistic norms and values do commenters apply when critiquing journalistic performance during a crisis? Are they related to traditional quality journalism, by ‘proto professionalization,’ or by something else entirely?

While Craft et al. (2015) strategically decided to look at commenters' criticism only in the context of ombudsmen's articles, this study seeks to assess what (if any) press criticisms would appear in the online comments to news covering an impactful crisis, namely a terrorist attack, where the public relies heavily on the media for information, context, solutions, and meaning. Both events were characterized by high levels of uncertainty (the attacks' magnitude, number of victims, etc.), misinformation (suspects were initially incorrectly identified, etc.), and plot twists (movie-like manhunt, city shutdown).

The current study also aimed to answer Naab & Sehl's (2016) call for the need for more international comparative studies related to user-generated content, such as online comments. Consequently, the two terrorist attacks were chosen due to their extensive national and international media coverage. France was selected as a country of comparison as it has also dealt with terrorist attacks (including 'homegrown'). Moreover, it allowed for a 'mirror' comparative system: two terrorist attacks during entertainment events, with high attendance, resulting in intense national and international media coverage. The author's fluency in French ensured a quality analysis.

*NYT* and *LF* were chosen as both: (1) have a strong online presence, audience and allow comment sections on their news stories; (2) are considered national newspapers (Kuhn, 2011; Schwartz, 2012) of record (Benson, 2013; Benson & Hallin, 2014); (3) are quality press (the quality press "portray themselves as a main arena for public opinion formation, and comments in the news of their websites could be understood as a central space for the digital public sphere" Ruiz et al., 2011, p. 468).

A few other strategic decisions were taken. Because the current study focused on two particular cases and the readers' critiques to media coverage, only online related news stories, filed under the "news" category, with more than four comments, were considered for analysis (excluding editorials, briefs, etc.). The timeframe corresponded to the attacks' timelines: April 15 to April 22, 2013, and November 13 to November 23, 2015. In the end, the analysis corpus encompassed: 25 news stories with 1,858 comments for *LF*; 9 news stories with 7,377 comments for *NYT* (2013), and 63 news stories with 8,373 comments for *LF*; 4 news stories with 6,545 comments for *NYT* (2015). Only the comments were analyzed for this study.

Following qualitative research procedures and rationale, instead of an *a priori* coding protocol, an inductive iterative approach was used to analyze the data and answer the research questions. First, all the comments were read, highlighting any evaluative language directed to the performance of *NYT* and *LF*, their journalists, other

specific/general news organizations, journalists, journalism. A second reading of the highlighted comments was conducted to get a sense of the evaluation being made by commenters, making notes and reflections. After a third reading, the emerging patterns were grouped into categories, subcategories, and themes, and comparisons were drawn. This system of analysis, consistent with the qualitative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2014; Punch, 2005), ensured that all critiques commenters might have offered were considered, and the categories and themes truly emerged from the data.

### **Findings**

Commenters were found to be very engaged and to be genuinely “watching” the watchdogs whose news they consumed. Regarding RQ1a and RQ1b, the analysis revealed an abundance of commenter critiques about journalistic performance, directly aimed at both news outlets, their journalists, other media outlets, and general media. *NYT* and *LF* commenters made positive and negative evaluative statements about the journalistic performance related to the coverage of the terrorist attacks. However, the positive statements appeared less than the negative ones.

Regarding RQ1c, more similarities were found between the evaluative statements of both newspapers’ commenters than differences. For both cases, three main categories emerged from the data analysis: *Appreciating Journalistic Performance*, *Criticizing Journalistic Performance*, and *Making Direct Demands on the Media*.

Regarding RQ2, the findings showed that commenters tended to fall within two categories when applying journalistic norms and values to their critiques (criticism, plaudits, direct demands). They drew from the ideal journalistic norms that should be upheld no matter what or judged journalistic performance through the lenses of the current context of the crises. Therefore, two categories of commenters emerged from the data: *puritans* and *realists*.

These categories, their related topics, the similarities, and differences, are explained below and further interpreted in the discussion section. Because of limited space, only one/two quotes are given for exemplifying purposes from the numerous analyzed comments. Each includes the abbreviated name of the publication (*NYT/LF*), month, day, year (x/x/xx). The data is presented as is, and quotes were not edited for grammar, spelling, etc.

#### **Appreciating Journalistic Performance**

While not the norm, a few commenters praised the quality of journalism and stories covering the terrorist attack. These praises were connected directly to *NYT* journalists and products. For example, they commend the high standards of journalism and the accuracy of the news stories, especially when compared to other media. Two examples: “I just want to thank the New York Times for

consistently maintaining high standards for covering this case. This is the only source I trust right now for accurate information” (*NYT*, 4/17/13); “Thank you to the NYT for its detailed and restrained coverage” (*NYT*, 11/14/15).

If in 2013, *LF* readers’ appreciation of journalistic performance was virtually nonexistent, in 2015, the commenters applauded multiple things. Plaudits referred to *LF* journalists and coverage, especially the quality of investigative journalism and humanizing the victims: “This is why Le Figaro is famous for its investigative journalism” (11/16/15); “Thank you for this tribute which shows the diversity of the victims mirroring the image of France” (11/16/15).

### **Criticizing Journalistic Performance**

The analysis revealed an overwhelming amount of criticism. American and French commenters criticized *NYT* and *LF*, and media in general, in 2013 and 2015. Because commenters’ discourses are fluid, readers would often start criticizing the newspaper specifically, moving towards the general media/other outlets within the same comments and conversation.

The main critique subjects that emerged from the data can be grouped into the following subcategories: *Quality of Information*; *Specific wording/phrasing*; *Journalistic Norms, and Ethics*. The analysis also revealed a pattern of commenters replying to the critics and *defending* the two newspapers and media in general in the sea of criticisms.

*Quality of Information.* Journalists from both publications were criticized for how the information was present/absent/incorrect/too old and hierarchized: “NY Times could have taken some more efforts to find out more about Lingzu Lu. She's barely acknowledged compared to the other two victims. Imagine how her family must feel” (*NYT*, 4/16/13). French commenters constantly compared *LF* with American news sources when criticizing its journalists for not including important information: “Why you did not publish the photos of the suspects? These people could be recognized by French readers, French viewers... While waiting, here are the photos on New York Post” (*LF*, 4/18/13). Interestingly, similar critiques appear in 2015: “Why do we have to go to Anglo-Saxon media to find a complete coverage on the poor victims?” (*LF*, 11/16/15); “We are obliged to look at CNN and BBC in order to know how many people died because of this foolish fanatic” (*LF*, 11/14/15).

In 2015, French and American commenters seemed very sensitive to the accuracy of the information, criticizing the *NYT* and *LF* for what they deem to be inaccurate/misinformation. The following examples illustrate: “There is one mistake in the article “The man with the Syrian passport.” This is not demonstrated at all;



the jury is still out at this time and we've been told recently that the passport appeared to be a fake one." (*NYT* 11/14/15); "Gentlemen journalists please check what you write: MOLENBEEK is not a suburb of Brussels, it is a part of Brussels city" (*LF* 11/16/15). Again, commenters cross-checked sources: "I have been reading and watching the French news since last night, Friday and this morning, and have not heard anyone mentioning the "Syrian" terrorist having been identified among other migrants traveling to Europe. Watch what you are writing" (*NYT*, 11/14/15).

Commenters criticize *NYT* and *LF* journalists for inconsistencies between headlines and content in their news stories: "A headline that says one thing, followed by an article that contradicts what was said in the headline. Time to go to bed!" (*LF*, 4/17/13); "The Times' homepage headline to this story, and the headline on the story page itself, are somewhat misleading, as details about the components of the bombs were already well-circulated yesterday-----old news this morning" (*NYT*, 4/16/13). In *LF* case, the same types of complaints emerged in 2015: "nothing in the content of the article justifies the choice of the headline. It suggests that there is evidence for a connection between 'criminal' and 'suburban'" (*LF*, 11/14/15).

Commenters heavily criticized the media for spreading misinformation and speculation, hate and fear: "It is the media who give the same info non-stop, 24/7, and that exaggerate, who create fear among the French people" (*LF*, 11/18/15); for over-mediating the attack, while ignoring other attacks or tragedies: "I hope The New York Times does not lose sight of the Texas fertilizer factory story. 35 people-the death toll that the mayor of West has now stated-in a town of about 3000 is truly tragic almost beyond comprehension" (*NYT*, 4/18/13); "Note that other democratic countries are affected this month. Here is a case that has gone unnoticed in France: One or two suitcase bombs were found TGV in Taiwan this Friday, April 12, we still do not know much" (*LF*, 4/16/13).

*Specific Wording/Phrasing.* Commenters condemned journalists' word choices that, in their minds, led to massive exaggerations in the reporting: "Journalists should try to keep some perspective when choosing the words they use. Both explosions were comparatively small. Judging from the various film shots, they appeared to have been somewhat less powerful than a standard US military hand grenade" (*NYT*, 4/15/13). In 2013, commenters took issue with journalists overemphasizing the loss of limbs, overusing terms like "dismembered limbs" and other related epithets: "Once again, the Times gives us a lurid title. 'save lives, if not legs.' Please stop referring to 'lost legs' in your titles. It is horrible and unnecessary" (*NYT*, 4/16/13); "Despite the confusion created by the authorities' contradictory statements, the investigators are working

relentlessly to identify suspects in the attack' if I was Figaro, I would avoid using the expression 'd'arrache-pied' in this context. Dark humor? Sad in this case" (*LF*, 4/18/13)."<sup>1</sup>

Both newspapers' journalists were slated for using what readers believed to be overly-sensationalistic language: "The title 'in a state of siege' enormously exaggerated the situation! Sensational, sure, but also deformed" (*LF*, 4/18/13); "Why do you use the term 'frenzied' [search] in the headline? To anyone watching all day, what was most evident was the deliberation with which the heavily armed searchers moved" (*NYT*, 4/19/13). In 2015, the same criticisms appeared: "It [using the word "apocalypse"] is indeed grandiloquent...and totally inappropriate!" (*LF*, 11/18/15); "'It looked like the end of the world.' How can one compare such a thing to something that no one has ever lived through? (Fortunately!) Anyway, if it were, the comparison would be rather difficult..." (*LF*, 11/18/15).

*Journalistic Norms and Ethics.* The media generally were heavily judged for what commenters perceived to be breaches of professional ethics and morality. Specific to American commenters only: the overwhelming critique of the media for invading people's privacy: "I'm disgusted with the press coverage of this disaster, which is intruding into the private lives of victims and their families. Suffocating the Boston area with reporters and vans is entirely inappropriate" (*NYT*, 4/16/13). Another aspect of this debate was including the victims' photos. *NYT* journalists were accused of invading the privacy of the victims, thus disrespecting/robbing them of their dignity: "Please remove the photo of the man who has the injured leg! I think that journalism should have some limitations and if he has nieces, nephews, etc. looking at the news, this is not what they should see!" (*NYT*, 4/15/13). In 2015, *LF* commenters brought the same arguments: "Imagine your own daughter lying dead in the photo (...) You have to understand the grieving parents" (*LF*, 11/19/15).

American and French commenters criticize *NYT* and *LF* also for publishing the alleged attackers' photos. Two arguments prevail in these debates:

a) Publishing these photos glorifies the evil: "I was horrified seeing this animal's grin[n]ing face front and center on the *NYT* site yesterday and now, again, today" (*NYT*, 11/19/15); "I found the starification of Abaaoud (...) totally inadequate" (*LF*, 11/19/15).

b) Journalists ignore their moral duty to publicize the faces and shattered lives of the victims first and foremost. Commenters believe that journalists need to contribute to the creation of the social

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<sup>1</sup>French expression "*d'arrache-pied*" means hard or relentlessly, and contains the word "foot"

memory by fixing the image of the victims into the public conscience: “Why does the NYT emblazon this mass murderer’s image on the digital front page for days? Continue to advertise his victims’ faces and keep the killer in obscurity” (*NYT*, 11/19/15).

In fact, in 2015, American and French commenters focus on the way the media presented the terrorists. One of their most prominent accusations: by mechanically respecting some journalistic norms (not reflecting upon them), journalists end up glorifying terrorists, helping their cause. Passionate reactions appear in *LF* around the journalistic usage of the word “martyr” to define the action and death of the terrorists. Commenters saw such terms as ‘terrorist’ dialectic’: “Shame for using the word martyr!!!! Remove it fast !!!!!” (*LF*, 11/17/15); “For the first time, I feel obligated to react to one of your articles (...) how can you qualify a terrorist act as ‘death of a martyr’!” (*LF*, 11/17/15).

Furthermore, commenters felt journalists exaggerate the malefic genius of the perpetrators: “Why such flowery language to describe a brutal mass murderer? According to the NYT online lead, the uneducated Abaaoud is ‘the architect’ of a lethal, multivictim attack that he ‘orchestrated. Let the pronouncement fit the crime. Skip the euphemisms and tell the truth about the ugly reality of terrorism” (*NYT*, 11/19/15).

Unexpectedly, in *LF* in 2015, a whole debate and stream of criticisms emerged around the idea of political correctness and journalistic norms/rules of neutrality that should not apply for terrorists (i.e., the word “alleged”): “[...] why the journalists still give the ‘presumed’ to the slaughtered terrorists? Are the victims also ‘presumed’?” (*LF*, 11/14/15).

American and French commenters accuse journalists of speculation and stereotyping. *NYT* was heavily criticized for mediatizing and emphasizing the nationality and religion of the initial suspect without fact-checking/waiting: “How irresponsible of the Times to include a sentence about the Saudi man ‘running from the scene.’ Was there anybody that was not running from the scene?” (*NYT*, 4/16/13); “Calling this ‘an attack on the civilized world’ is a poorly chosen statement, or perhaps a poorly chosen headline by the NYT” (*NYT*, 11/15/15). In 2013, and more so in 2015, *LF* was heavily criticized for substituting hard facts with unsubstantial speculation: “Would...would...?? All that conditional... Wait until you have verified and verifiable sources!” (*LF*, 4/19/13); “Unfortunately we can’t get rid of the old clichés: ‘armed-to-the-teeth’” (*LF*, 11/15/15).

The media were further condemned for lacking political correctness: “My heart goes out to Boston, but I am slightly infuriated by the reporting. Would the journalist had been so detailed with the religious beliefs of the suspects had they been Christian, or

perhaps Jewish?" (*NYT*, 4/19/13). But they were similarly criticized for being too politically correct and missing the facts: "The mainstream media seems to be going out of its way not to mention the word 'Islam.' They mention 'radicalized' 'devout' etc., but never mention the word Islam" (*NYT*, 4/20/13); "Reading the reactions, I'd say that people are tired of political correctness dripping permanently on our TVs and diverse media. That must stop and all the points of view must be represented, not just the 'honest' and 'humanist' left" (*LF*, 4/19/13).

*Defending journalism performances against criticisms.*

Commenters engaged in many debates about every aspect of the attack, including journalistic performances while covering the bombing. Uniquely to *NYT* comment sections, the analysis found that in these debates, numerous commenters replied to the critics and defended its journalistic performance in particular or media in general.

When some condemned *NYT* journalists for overly describing the attack's aftermath, others argued that journalists are supposed to report the reality no matter how grim: "Maybe describing what really happened, as opposed to sanitizing the event, is another way to look at it" (*NYT*, 4/16/13). Similar arguments appeared when defending *NYT*'s publication of victims' photos, placing the need to know the truth above the right of privacy: "Where is the indignity? If the news media have any role left in this world other than as talking heads, it is to show us what has happened. It's not their role to protect us from the shock of the truth" (*NYT*, 4/15/13). In the same context, others argued that these stories and photos were not disrespectful but showed the victims' strength or the reality: "No – that man is a survivor. The picture communicates a thousand words – to my heart in particular" (*NYT*, 4/15/13); "This photo can be useful. Don't they disseminate morbid photos in order to make people understand smoking can kill them?" (*LF*, 11/18/15).

Readers defended *NYT* journalists against accusations of stereotyping and being politically incorrect. Arguments included the importance of simply reporting facts: "It was factual information reporting. Accurate. Why suppress it?" (*NYT*, 4/15/13); and the idea that media's job is not to be politically correct: "Newspapers are not supposed to be politically correct. They are supposed to print facts" (*NYT* 4/15/13). In 2015, *NYT* was not accused so much of stereotyping. In fact, commenters praised the newspaper: "Thank you so much, *NYT*, for not following the lead of CNN (and some other sources I've seen) who refer to the (...) unlamented terrorist leader as the 'mastermind' of the Paris horrors (...) Thank you for respecting that reality in your choice of terminology" (*NYT*, 11/19/15).

When the *NYT* journalists' were criticized for including what was deemed as "no news" (no updates) or "old news" (e.g., the

components of the bombs made public a day before), commenters who defended those decisions conveyed the importance of reporting the facts and the elements of newsworthiness that go beyond newest information: “Well what do you want them to do in the absence of facts...make it up like Fox News?” (*NYT*, 4/16/13). They also emphasized that journalists should help readers who couldn’t follow the news 24/7: “those who aren’t able to check Twitter constantly (...) may appreciate having news here on the *NYT* to catch up on the next day. Even if it was well-circulated last night, rather than having to scrounge the web” (*NYT*, 4/16/13).

Some also defended the general media’s performance, arguing that for terrorist attacks, over-mediating is not a bad thing; it does not spread fear, and thorough analysis is needed: “And why should this tragic event not be thoroughly analyzed? (...) People have died. Many have been injured. The reports are not ‘fear.’ This is called breaking news” (*NYT*, 4/15/13). The same argument appears in 2015 against criticism about showcasing terrorists: “This is a difficult issue. The public has a right to know what the subject of a manhunt looks like. There are cases when broadcasting a person’s image can lead to the capture of that person” (*NYT*, 11/19/15).

#### Making Direct Demands to the Media

Commenters are actively consuming these news stories, and they use the comment sections space to dissect, critique, and debate journalistic content and performance, but their participation does not stop there. The analysis revealed that online commenters directly address and try to engage *NYT* and *LF*. They make various demands that show they are there to make sense of the event, discover the truth, and hold media accountable for their reporting.

A popular direct request was for better explanations and timelines of unfolding events. In this regard, the majority of demand messages were pleasant and complimentary: “This story is begging for the kind of interactive timeline breakdown that the Times does so well” (*NYT*, 4/20/13). The same emerged in 2015 in *LF* comments related to the chronology of attacks and mentions of the attackers’ nationalities.

In 2013, in *LF*’s case, some commenters corrected the information that the journalists provided, using their knowledge of the issue or the information found on the ‘original’ American media sources, thus serving as fact-checkers for the newspaper while demanding the correction of misinformation: “Yet ‘Le Figaro’ forgot to mention that Carlos Arronedo had told the US media (it is in the US press today): ‘I do not want this name/label of Hero because, I’m not one, I only gave a hand to the rescuers and that’s all’” (*LF*, 4/16/2013).

In 2013, commenters demanded certain videos/photos be removed: “I ask urgently to Figaro to remove the video, it isn’t

information but sensationalism whose sole purpose is to attract clients, to start that unhealthy voyeurism that pushes people to slow down by an accident scene just to watch” (*LF*, 4/15/13). In 2015, commenters vehemently requested that the journalists omit detailed information about the attackers: “Please, gentlemen and ladies journalists, stop telling the story of killers’ lives, talk more about the ones who lost their lives. Stop advertising the killers” (*LF*, 11/15/15); “Dear NY Times, Could you please stop posting the pictures and/or videos of the perpetrators of the atrocities in Paris and other places? I don’t want to know what they look like and I don’t want to see them smiling. Frankly, I don’t even want to know their names (...) By all means report the news and tell us the facts, but, don’t give them publicity (...)” (*NYT*, 11/19/15).

Commenters clearly saw these online comment sections as interactive spaces in which they could directly reach media organizations. However, the analysis did not reveal a two-way communication. In 2013 and 2015, no *NYT/LF* representative engaged with the readers’ plaudits or criticisms, and no one responded to direct requests. The only indication of the possibility that at least some of the demands found a resolve was an *NYT* comment (related to a debate and direct demands on advertising):

And thank you *NYT* for taking the ad off the loop. Some of us realize that it probably was an automatic add-on when the video was posted to the site and as soon as humans realized from the comments it was removed (*NYT*, 4/18/13).

### **Discussion**

Inspired by Craft et al.’s (2015) concept of reader comments as press criticism, this study explored the evaluative statements made by *NYT* and *LF* online commenters about journalistic performances in their coverage of two terrorist attacks.

American and French commenters in both cases proved to be avid news consumers of the news they commented on and other media sources. They used the comment sections as spaces to support and criticize the journalistic performance. Plaudits were directed to the two publications’ journalists. Criticisms were directed at the two newspapers’ content but also the general media. Commenters made direct demands to the two publications’ journalists and editors asking for: more/correct/verified information, different storytelling elements’ inclusion/exclusion – suggesting that similar to what Stroud et al. (2016) found, in these particular analyzed cases, commenters wanted journalists to participate and answer their factual questions. Even more importantly, the current study found that commenters participate in this online space not only to seek/add/correct information about the terrorist attacks and be part of a debate (Ksiazek et al., 2014; Stroud et al., 2016). But more notably, they do it because they want to take part in the process of

manufacturing the news (Springer et al., 2015). They feel they (should) have a say/role to play in the journalistic process.

Comparable to what Craft et al. (2015) found, commenters' support and criticisms (and defending arguments) in both analyzed cases also seem to be rooted in professional and social norms. Subjects of critiques were related to accuracy and facts, truth, bias, stereotyping, etc., which became vital in a crisis.

Additionally, the findings reveal two types of commenters when judging journalistic and media performance: *puritans* and *realists*. In their criticisms, puritans refer to the ideal professional culture, strict regulatory frameworks, and norms of journalism; they commend the "textbook" values and norms of journalism and condemn what they perceive to be grave journalistic errors in relation to these frameworks and norms. The realists accept the difficulties of journalistic work in the context of such events (crises, terrorist attacks) while expecting journalists to be able to overcome them. They do not condemn but explain and justify the errors while recommending ways to surmount them.

### **Conclusions**

Online readers are engaged and watch and judge journalists' performance. Online news comment sections are here to stay and remain the most popular engagement form of participatory journalism for audiences (Chen & Pain, 2016; Krebs & Lischa, 2017; Wright et al., 2019), whether online or social media platforms. Media organizations are still trying to figure out how to make these spaces work for them. Journalists and editors are expected to take more active roles in managing online and social media comments, promoting, and bringing traffic to stories. So, from a practical perspective, the findings show that at least in a crisis, when the public depends even more on the media for information, context and meaning, online readers expect to be part of the journalistic process and want their direct demands to be heard and answered. At the same time, there was no evidence of journalists/editors replying or engaging. It could be argued that journalists could benefit from participating in these spaces. Still, the findings did not reveal any imperative demands or direct threats (i.e., if you don't answer, then...). So, at this point, while a dialogic approach would be ideal, as Craft et al. (2015) argued, whether or not these criticisms (and in this case, direct demands) are actually threatening to journalists depends on the extent to which these commenters can and do exert exogenous force on the profession. The findings of this study offer no such evidence.

From a broader theoretical perspective, these forms of participation in the production and the debate of news stories and these processes can also be looked at from the normative perspective of the debates related to media criticism. Usually, media criticism

(from the Frankfurt School to the numerous analyses conducted on gender, ethnic, race studies and from the political economy to the studies regarding the role of media in a democracy) shows the biases of the news and the weaknesses of the press, starting from a normative frame (the ideal roles of the media in a democracy). The same normative parameters have moved the debates regarding freedom of expression, professionalism, media accountability, ethical standards, and more recently, fake news. So, media criticism was usually expressed by intellectual elites inspired by different theories rooted in political philosophy. The final expression of this normative approach is now materialized in the theoretical model and the policies regarding media literacy - a coordinated effort of journalists and educators to prepare audiences to avoid misinformation, media bias, propaganda, fake news, thus developing critical thinking about their media environment.

This current study stresses the forms that media criticism takes when their performance is evaluated by common readers and not by philosophers, media scholars, or journalists. However, *NYT* and *LF* commenters are people with a strong media literacy level who know and support the norms of quality press: they are a “community of debate” (Ruiz et al., 2011). Yet it remains somehow unexpected that, when confronted with the reality of a terrorist attack aftermath, these same people equate the journalistic norms of neutral coverage with an inadequate form of political correctness. In the face of the terror and attacks on western values, commenters request journalists to forgo the status of detached observers and assume the position of community members: they ask journalists to use accusative terms to name the terrorists and their deeds (in other words, to forget about the “innocent until proven guilty” and terms such as “alleged”). They ask journalists to bring consolation and reassurance to their communities (the “pastoral role,” Schudson, 2011, p. 49) and judge, accuse and condemn the attacks’ perpetrators in the name of the ‘wounded’ community. It seems that in these types of crises, the public wants not only facts and information but also a militant journalism that doesn’t abandon the public, that resonates with its emotions and gives it a voice in their news. In these situations, media criticism is not just the expression of some abstract normative judgments but also the echo of suffering and patriotic involvement during a crisis.

The current study has some limitations. It only explores two particular cases and compared only two online newspapers from two countries. To truly deepen international comparative research on online commenters’ press criticisms and demands in crises, the next step is to compare more related cases and include more countries and news outlets. It would also be interesting to see how less “quality” media’s publics react in these situations. Future research should



compare what happens in terrorist attacks aimed at journalists themselves (i.e., Charlie Hebdo). Moreover, to see if these same typologies appear outside crises, future research should assess online comment sections related to other types of news (electoral campaigns, sports, etc.).

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## **Facebook Top Fans, Opinion Leadership, & Perceived News Bias: A Modern Application of Two-Step Flow to Online News Distribution**

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*News distributed via Facebook feature comments, which influence audiences. Integrating hostile media bias and two-step flow, this study tests whether an individual's issue positions, experiences, and exposure to comments influence how Top Fans and others perceive news bias. A survey experiment using a nationwide sample of Facebook users (N = 319) tested the influence of the opinion climate on COVID-19 vaccinations and federal student loan forgiveness. Results show visible opinion leaders (i.e., Top Fans) differently perceived bias in news content.*

### **Introduction**

Both digitally native news outlets and the traditional press industry use multiple online platforms for news distribution. Given that the majority of Americans get at least a portion of their news online, especially through mobile devices (Pew, 2019), social media serve as one of the most significant ways to reach audiences. Outside of a news network's host website, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are a popular choice for news outlets to freely distribute content and seek user engagement. The unique features of Facebook, the most popular outlet for news consumption among U.S. adults (Gramlich, 2019), may inadvertently influence how news content is perceived by audiences. For instance, Facebook users see details about other users (e.g., name, image, Top Fan status) and their comments on news content *before* accessing the story itself, which may induce a hostile media effect.

The hostile media phenomenon occurs when strong partisans or people who strongly support a particular position on an issue perceive balanced media coverage to be biased against their position (Perloff, 2015; Vallone et al., 1985). Hostile media bias is more prominent when an audience is exposed to a controversial issue of importance, has a depth of knowledge about an issue, or when the topic has high personal relevance (Feldman, 2011; Kim, 2019; Vallone et al., 1985). The current study moves beyond these assumptions by controlling for these factors and focusing on only the unique influence of the Facebook environment, namely Top Fan status and the congruence of user comments. Specifically, this study aims to establish whether Top Fan status can serve as an indicator of opinion leadership and exert more influence through comments than other users, similar to the influence proposed by the two-step flow theory.

Two-step flow theory explains how certain knowledgeable individuals are influenced by media content and share those messages with others in their community. On social media, opinion leaders continue to exert influence on others in a networked two-step flow (Messing & Westwood, 2014). In addition to Top Fan status, Facebook users also see comments posted by others about news stories. These comments can be seen *before* accessing and reading a news article, potentially influencing audience opinions. The content of these comments, especially whether they express opinions that either agree or disagree with the audience, may also exert influence through the hostile media effect (Gearhart et al., 2020).

The current study integrates the hostile media bias phenomenon and two-step flow, to test whether issue positions, experiences within the Facebook network, and exposure to one-sided comments differently influence how Top Fans (i.e., opinion leaders) and common users perceive online news bias. Using two timely topics, COVID-19 vaccines and student loan forgiveness, a survey experiment of Facebook users tests the influence of these factors and compares online opinion leaders and common users. Results provide evidence about the usefulness of integrating these two long-standing theories and practical implications regarding online opinion leaders within social media environments and how they differently process news content.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Two-Step Flow Theory & Opinion Leadership**

Two-step flow theory explains how certain knowledgeable individuals will be influenced by media messages and share those messages with others in their communities. The idea of two-step flow can be dated back to research about opinion leaders that originated as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) surveyed voters in the 1940 U.S. presidential election. Their research found that certain voters became opinion leaders when they were active media users collecting, interpreting, synthesizing, and spreading those messages to other voters (Katz & Larzarsfeld, 1955). This pattern of information flow from media to active users and to mass audiences was named two-step flow and has since become one of the classic limited media effect theories. Through the lens of two-step flow theory, mass media only have limited effects on most people because interpersonal communication also plays an important role in the communication process.

Two-step flow has been criticized for oversimplifying the flow of communication by categorizing media users into opinion leaders and non-leaders (Weimann, 1991). Application of the two-step flow theory should also consider the modern media environment, which includes multiple outlets and perspectives to the public and may further complicate the process. Despite these concerns, the

importance of opinion leaders has continued to be noted across areas such as politics, health, and consumer decisions, to name a few (e.g., Troldahl, 1996). For example, in politics, the flow of media messages to audiences is often mediated through opinion leaders. The role of these individuals is vital to engaging citizenry in forms of political and civic participation, such as campaign involvement and political discussion (Shah & Scheufele, 2006).

Although new media challenge traditional communication concepts and theories, a growing body of research showcases that the concept of an opinion leader transfers into the current media environment (e.g., Case et al., 2004). Research shows that opinion leadership can manifest in the new roles a digital environment allows, such as through commenters, bloggers, and/or influencers (Medero, in press).

### **Two-step Flow & Hostile Media Bias**

Hostile media bias posits that partisans perceive neutral media content to be biased in favor of the opposing party (Vallone et al., 1985). Vallone et al. (1985) found that when participants were exposed to identical news content about the Arab-Israeli conflict, partisans from both sides perceived the news content as biased against their own parties. While those who are not strongly affiliated with a party or an issue are less likely to perceive bias in neutral media content (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004), the distance between personal opinions and perceived media opinion has been found to impact hostile media perceptions (Wojcieszak, 2010). The level of perceived bias also depends on how deeply individuals are involved in the issue and how important they consider the issue (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). This means that personal opinion strength impacts perceptions of bias in media content, and those who are strongly engaged with issues perceive more bias as compared to others (e.g., Gunther & Schmitt, 2004).

In a highly polarized media environment, two-step flow communication becomes more salient in strengthening individuals' personal opinions. Individuals who believe issues are important and want to be knowledgeable about them are more likely to find information from the media and distribute it to others (Eveland & Shah, 2003). Further, personal opinion strength can be induced by personal ego and opinion leaders among interpersonal communication (Wojcieszak, 2010). Eveland and Shah (2003) found that more interpersonal communication with others who have similar opinions as you positively predicted a higher level of perceived media bias.

Existent research has shown that opinion leaders are more likely to be susceptible to hostile media perceptions (Tsang & Rojas, 2020). That is, those who are known to be opinion leaders tend to sense that media portrayals are biased against their opinion. Opinion



leaders might experience stronger perceptions of hostile media bias because of their firm stance on the issue and deep involvement with it (Shah & Scheufele, 2006).

### **News Distribution & Consumption on Social Media**

Social media is a popular and important channel for online news distribution and consumption. About half of Americans use social media to get news (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Each platform has unique affordances and algorithms, changing how users are exposed to news and how they engage with information (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Facebook, in particular, serves as a regular news source for about one-third of Americans, surpassing the use of Youtube, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

In addition to the information social media users seek out, they also incidentally encounter various news and information, potentially attracting unexpected consumers to news organizations (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018). This happenstance engagement benefits news outlets because their business model can be transferred into the online environment. As a result, news organizations, such as *BBC* and the *Associated Press*, and many others have dedicated social media editors who manage their multiple social accounts, thus integrating online engagement into the news dissemination process for the long-term (Gleason, 2010). While there are concerns that social media news consumers are less likely to keep up with major news topics and events and have less knowledge about such issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, many users continue to rely on the platforms (Mitchell et al., 2020).

*Comments on Social Media.* Traditional news outlets distribute content on companion websites and understand the need to create engage with users (Chung, 2008). However, the management of comment sections on news websites proved problematic and have even been found to strongly impact individuals' perception of bias (Houston et al., 2011; Lee, 2012). Given the resources needed for moderation and management of comment sections, many news organizations, including major outlets such as *Reuters* and *USA Today*, shut down comment sections (Ellis, 2015). Instead, news outlets rely almost entirely on their social media pages for user engagement, which reaches an even broader audience (Kemp, 2021).

While the free distribution of news content on social platforms, especially Facebook, has some advantages for news outlets, there are concerns that aspects of the environment may alter news consumption. For instance, Facebook uniquely exposes users to others' comments before clicking on a news teaser advertising a story and reading the content. In fact, the impact of the comments seen on Facebook news teasers has been found to impact perceptions of media bias (Gearhart et al., 2020). Specifically, Gearhart et al. (2020)

found individuals who saw comments that agreed with their own point of view on a topic reported the news to be more credible than those who saw comments that disagreed with their perspective. Therefore, the opinion climate surrounding a particular news topic may be influenced by user comments on social media outlets.

*Opinion Leadership on Facebook.* While developed in the legacy media era, opinion leadership on social media can be indicated by metrics, such as the number of followers, whether users post/create sponsored content, or through distinguishable indicators of officiality such as a checkmark or a badge. One recent strategy used by Facebook to increase engagement is identifying active users and offering them a ‘Top Fan’ badge (Hutchinson, 2019; Isentia, 2020). The platform invites the most active followers on a page to attach a Top Fan badge to their profile, which then appears next to their name on posted comments associated with the page (Facebook, 2020).

Top Fan status not only distinguishes a badge-holder from a common user, but it also serves as a visible indicator of an opinion leader within the platform. Previous research indicates that opinion leaders are more likely to have certain psychological traits such as openness, exhibitionism, interpersonal competence, and uniqueness (Casaló et al. 2020; Song et al., 2017). Possession of such personality traits is often related to having a high need for self-presentation (Seidman, 2013). Thus, individuals with a Top Fan badge on Facebook, which is offered to only the most active users (Facebook, 2020), are identifiable opinion leaders within the platform who may hold influence over less active users.

### **Topics**

Both two-step flow theory and hostile media bias involve the media portrayals of issues important to the public. Both student loan debt forgiveness and COVID-19 vaccinations are issues of importance that have been politicized in ways that have deeply divided American society. As such, these two issues hold public interest, garner media attention, and are suitable for application to a test of hostile media bias.

*Student Loan Debt Forgiveness:* In the U.S., most individuals who complete a four-year degree accumulate debt to assist with their education (Pew, 2020). Forgiveness or cancellation of debt incurred from these loans is a pressing issue, expedited further by widespread job loss and pay cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic that compounded existing financial strife for many (Parker et al., 2020). Forgiveness, in full or in part, is intended to bring some relief to former students and their families through the cancellation or discharge of federal student loans (Federal Student Aid, 2020). Yet, many still struggle, with about 1 in 5 borrowers’ loans going into default only months into the pandemic (Sattelmeyer et al., 2021).

Fighting to keep up with loans can become an enduring struggle for financial stability in a regular economy, but during and beyond the pandemic, borrowers will likely seek forgiveness more than ever (Parker et al., 2020; Sattelmeyer et al., 2021; Sommer, 2020). Many citizens favor cancellation, even some without their own student loan debt (McGurran, 2020). Vocal opposition to forgiveness also exists, often composed of older and more politically conservative Americans with a range of arguments concerning taxes, fairness, and consideration of burdening non-borrowers (McGurran, 2020; Song, 2021).

*COVID-19 Vaccination:* To combat the spread of COVID-19 and related variants of coronavirus around the world, urgent vaccination of as many people as possible was touted as the best means to ending the pandemic. After the U.S. government approved multiple vaccines and ramped up efforts to administer them to the public, mandatory COVID-19 vaccination was suggested by public health professionals and institutes (Baratti, 2020). For example, the Australian flying company Qantas made early plans to require their international passengers to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19 (BBC, 2020).

Surprisingly, COVID-19 vaccination became a divisive and controversial issue in the U.S. Public acceptance of mandatory COVID-19 vaccines was divided regarding state mandates for children, adults, and employees (Largent et al., 2020). While reports on the support of mandatory vaccinations vary, according to a CNBC survey conducted in 2020, around half of American employees (57%) support a mandatory COVID-19 vaccine, reflecting a divide in opinions on vaccination (Wronski & Cohen, 2020).

#### **Hypotheses & Research Questions**

Using the issues discussed above, the current study integrates two-step flow theory into a test of hostile media bias. Comparing both Facebook opinion leaders and other users, the following hypotheses and research questions guide this work:

H1: Perceived issue importance will positively predict perceptions of news bias among both (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users.

RQ1: Does how closely one follows the media about a specific topic influence perceived news bias among (a) opinion leaders and (b) common users?

RQ2: How do general feelings about social media platforms influence the perception of news bias among (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users?

H2: Perceptions of having previously experienced a more agreeable Facebook environment will positively predict perceptions of news bias for both (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users.

RQ3: How does exposure to like-minded comments influence the perception of news bias among (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users?

## Method

### Participants & Procedures

The current study recruited adult Facebook users to participate using the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online platform. This site allows academic researchers to register as requesters and solicit online research participation opportunities and collect high-quality samples (Zhang & Gearhart, 2020). Following approval from a university-affiliated Institutional Review Board, the study was fielded for one day in March, 2021. Responses were collected using an online survey hosted through a university-affiliated Qualtrics account. The participation opportunity was solicited to MTurkers who were paid \$1.00 each for their voluntary participation in the study. In addition to the usual fee, the MTurk platform also charged an additional \$0.05 per participant to recruit only Facebook users. Among those who responded to the survey solicitation, a total of 340 participants were exposed to the experimental conditions tested here. Removal of incomplete responses yielded the final data set ( $N = 338$ ).

Respondents who passed the screener questions, which inquired about whether they currently use Facebook and are located in the U.S., began by answering questions about their media use, general feelings about social media, and their status as a Top Fan themselves within the Facebook platform. Next, using an embedded experimental manipulation, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two controversial topics, either mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations or federal student loan forgiveness. After being randomly assigned to one of the two topics, each participant was asked about their own opinion on the matter, how personally important the issue was to them, how certain they were of their opinion, and how whether they see their own opinion reflected on Facebook.

After answering questions about their own opinions on the matter and their involvement with the issue, participants were randomly presented with a news teaser on the same topic (i.e., either mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations or student loan debt forgiveness). The news teaser featured a Facebook post with a neutral image of the U.S. Supreme Court and was shown as being posted by an impartial source, *USA Today*, a news outlet rated as central in ideology and highly reliable (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). Below each post were

crafted comments that appeared to be posted by other Facebook users, which displayed one-sided comments that either agreed with or disputed the participant's own opinion. That is, based on the respondent's previously disclosed opinion, they were randomly assigned to view Facebook comments expressing comments that only agreed with their opinion or only disagreed with their opinion on the topic.

After viewing the news teaser and Facebook comments, participants advanced to view the advertised news story. The news story on each topic was written by authors of this study with expertise in AP style and was developed to present neutral content to readers. Regardless of the topic, the news stories were standardized and maintained all story features with the exception of the title and topic across conditions. Finally, participants were asked about their perceptions of bias within the news story.

On average, participants reported an age of 38.22 years ( $SD = 12.53$ ). The majority of participants were male (56.5%). On average, respondents completed between a 2-year and 4-year college degree ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and self-identified as moderates (1 = *very conservative* to 5 = *very liberal*) ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). The majority were Caucasian (58.4), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (22.4%), Black/African American (7.8%), Hispanic/Latino (6.8%), and other groups (4.5%). The average household income ranged from \$40,000 to under \$60,000 (1 = *less than \$20,000* to 10 = *\$100,000 or more*) ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ).

## Measures

### Independent Variables

*Top fan.* Participants were split into two groups based upon their status as opinion leaders within the Facebook platform. Near the beginning of their participation, each respondent was asked whether they are "currently listed as a 'Top Fan' on any Facebook pages" (0 = no; 1 = yes). Among the sample, 42% of respondents ( $n = 191$ ) reported currently being listed as a Top Fan on a Facebook page and 58% ( $n = 147$ ) of participants are not currently listed as a Top Fan on Facebook.

*Issue importance.* This independent variable measures the perceived importance of the focal issue to each individual respondent. Measurement of this variable is gauged by asking respondents "How important is the issue of [insert randomly assigned topic] to you personally?" using a ten-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *very important*). The blank was filled with one of three options depending on which issue they were randomly assigned, either mandatory COVID-19 vaccination or federal student loan forgiveness.

*Attitude certainty.* Attitude certainty refers to the level of certitude that an individual has that their attitude is correct (Krosnick

et al., 1993). Responses were collected using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all certain* - 7 = *very certain*). Respondents were asked: "How certain are you of your opinion on the issue of [insert randomly assigned topic]?" ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). The topic varied from either mandatory COVID-19 vaccination or federal student loan forgiveness. This single-item measure of attitude certainty is reliable and has been successfully used in psychological research (Matthes et al., 2010).

*Media issue involvement.* In an effort to better understand each respondent's involvement with the issue through media use, participants were asked about their exposure to media about the topic. Using a single-item, respondents were asked how closely they follow media coverage on the issue of [insert randomly assigned topic] ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). The topic varied from either mandatory COVID-19 vaccination or federal student loan forgiveness.

*Social media feeling.* This composite measure asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with six statements using 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* - 7 = *strongly agree*). The statements included: (a) I feel fine using social media websites since they are generally reliable; (b) most social media websites are able to meet users needs; (c) most social media websites are helpful; (d) in general, social media websites are well-managed; (e) I always feel confident that social media websites will do what I want them to do; and (f) I feel that most social media websites act in people's best interests. The items were found to be reliably related before being combined to form an index ( $\alpha = .92$ ;  $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

*Facebook opinion environment.* In order to better understand each individual's perceived Facebook opinion environment, respondents were asked about the typical climate they experience related to the topic. Using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* - 7 = *strongly agree*), participants were asked: "Based upon the types of comments you typically see on Facebook, would you say that the majority of others disagree or agree with your stance on [insert randomly assigned topic]?" ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = .78$ ). The topic varied from either mandatory COVID-19 vaccination or federal student loan forgiveness.

*Like-minded comment exposure.* All participants were exposed to a series of three Facebook comments below a news teaser posted by *USA Today* advertising the story. The comments were seen prior to viewing the neutral news story and displayed opinions that either demonstrably agreed or disagreed with the respondent's position on the issue. This was manipulated by first asking respondents a series of questions about their own opinion on the topic, which included a dichotomous assessment that placed them on one side of the issue (i.e., either in favor or against the proposed

vaccine mandate or student loan forgiveness). Among the sample, half ( $n = 169$ ) were exposed to comments posted by other Facebook users that expressed views that disagreed with their opinion on the topic. The other half ( $n = 169$ ), viewed Facebook comments expressing comments that aligned with their opinion on the matter. Prior to analysis, items were dummy coded (i.e., 1 = *exposure to like-minded comments*, 0 = *exposure to dissimilar comments*).

*Demographics.* On average, participants reported an age of 38.22 years ( $SD = 12.53$ ). The majority of participants were male (56.5%). On average, respondents completed between a 2-year and 4-year college degree ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and self-identified as moderates (1 = *very conservative* to 5 = *very liberal*) ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). Most respondents were Caucasian (58.4%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (22.4%), Black/African American (7.8%), Hispanic/Latino (6.8%), and other groups (4.5%). The average household income ranged from \$40,000 to under \$60,000 (1 = *less than \$20,000* to 10 = *\$100,000 or more*) ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ).

#### **Dependent Variable**

*News Bias.* Using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly biased against my opinion* to 7 = *strongly biased in favor of my opinion*), participants were asked to rate their perception of news bias originating from different levels of the news industry's structure (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). The items included: (a) do you feel that the news story was greatly biased against or in favor of your opinion about [insert assigned issue topic]; (b) do you feel that the writer of the news story was greatly biased against or in favor your opinion; and (c) do you feel that the news outlet that published this story was greatly biased against or in favor of your opinion. The three items were combined to form an index ( $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ).

#### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses of this study. Demographic variables were entered as the first block of the model, which included sex, age, level of education, political ideology, and race. This block was followed by the variables assessing issue perceptions, including perceived issue importance, level of attitude certainty, and involvement with the media on the assigned topic. The final focal independent variables, including trust in social media platforms, perceptions of the Facebook opinion environment, and exposure to either agreeable or disagreeable comments on the news teaser were entered last.

#### **Results**

H1 predicted that individuals' level of perceived issue importance will positively predict perceptions of news bias among both (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users. As seen in the Table, respondents who are currently Top Fans on Facebook and have a

high level of issue importance were likely to perceive the news as biased against their opinion ( $\beta = .15, p = .02$ ). However, among respondents who are common Facebook users, issue importance was not found to predict perceptions of news bias ( $\beta = .12, p = .09$ ). Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

*Table: Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Perceptions of News Bias*

	Facebook Top Fans	Facebook Common Users
<b>Demographics</b>		
Sex (female higher)	-.12	-.09
Age	-.21**	-.09
Education	.08	-.05
Ideology (Liberal higher)	.05	.18*
Race (Caucasian higher)	-.06	-.05
<b>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</b>	26.2%	6.6%
<b>Issue Perceptions</b>		
Issue Importance	.18*	.10
Attitude Certainty	.02	-.17**
Media Issue Involvement	.21**	-.10
<b>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</b>	18.9%	5.5%
<b>Social Media Opinion Climate</b>		
Social Media Trust	.09	.22**
Facebook Opinion Environment	.23**	.16**
Exposure to Likeminded Comments	-.14*	.12
<b>Incremental R<sup>2</sup> (%)</b>	6.7%	10.4%
<b>Total R<sup>2</sup> (%)</b>	51.8%	22.4%

*Note:* The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$       \*\*  $p < .01$       \*\*\*  $p < .001$

RQ1 asked whether how closely one follows the media about a specific topic influences perceived news bias among (a) opinion leaders and (b) common users. Results showed that Facebook Top Fans who closely follow the media about a topic were likely to perceive the news story content as strongly biased in favor of their own opinion biased against their opinion ( $\beta = .21, p = .01$ ). On the other hand, common Facebook users (i.e., non-Top Fans) who closely follow the media on the topic were no more likely to perceive the news as being biased in favor of their opinion on the topic ( $\beta = .10, p = .25$ ).

RQ2 asked if general feelings about social media platforms influence the perception of news bias among (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users. After controlling for demographics and issues perceptions, results showed that positive feelings about social media among Top Fans on Facebook did not predict perceptions of news



bias ( $\beta = .09, p = .26$ ). However, common Facebook users (i.e., non-Top Fans) who have generally positive feelings about social media platforms were likely to perceive the news story content as strongly biased in favor of their own opinion biased against their opinion ( $\beta = .22, p = .005$ ).

H2 predicted that perceptions of having previously experienced a more agreeable Facebook environment will positively predict perceptions of news bias for both (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users. As seen in Table 1, Top Fans who tend to experience an agreeable opinion environment, where the majority of Facebook comments they see agree with their stance on the issue, have significantly higher perceptions of news bias ( $\beta = .23, p = .003$ ). Likewise, common users (i.e., non-Top Fans) who report a tendency to encounter opinions on Facebook that agree with their opinion on the topic are also more likely to perceive news bias ( $\beta = .16, p = .008$ ). As such, H2 was supported.

RQ3 inquired about the relationship between exposure to like-minded comments before reading the news article and perceptions of news bias within the story among (a) opinion leaders; and (b) common users. After controlling for demographics and issues perceptions, results showed that Top Fans on Facebook who saw like-minded comments prior to reading the story were significantly less likely to perceive news bias against their own opinion on the topic ( $\beta = -.14, p = .03$ ). However, common Facebook users (i.e., non-Top Fans) who were exposed to comments that agreed with their own opinion prior to reading the news article were no more or less likely to perceive news bias within the story content ( $\beta = .12, p = .09$ ).

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the differences between online opinion leaders (i.e., Top Fans) and ordinary Facebook users in terms of the influence of issue positions and the online opinion climate on perceptions of news bias. The comments that social media users post on news stories are a necessary evil for news organizations, who distribute content on social platforms to encourage user engagement and expand the reach of their content. Through the application of hostile media perceptions and integration of two-step flow, results show that, while issue positions are important, the Facebook opinion environment bears a strong influence on how news is perceived by users. Furthermore, the influences differ between Top Fans (i.e., opinion leaders) and common users, demonstrating the long-lasting relevance of two-step flow theory.

Findings support the initial hypothesis, which presumed a strong positive influence of perceived issue importance on perceptions of news bias. However, this only held true among Top

Fans (i.e., opinion leaders) and not for common users. Hostile media bias was initially tested using only strong partisans (Vallone et al., 1985), limiting the applicability of the implications to the broader public. This study overcomes that limitation, the inclusion of issue importance may serve as an indicator of issue involvement, which may be an aspect of opinion strength and/or opinion leadership, an important factor in two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Typical tests of hostile media bias tend to assess perceptions of bias as being against one's own opinion. However, perceived media bias can go either direction, which can be biased against one's opinion or in favor of one's opinion (Tsang & Rojas, 2000; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). Higher scores here indicated that individuals felt the news content was biased in favor of their opinion. Results showed that Top Fans (i.e., online opinion leaders) who placed high importance on the issue felt the news content was strongly biased in favor of their position, which was not true for common users. This indicates that online opinion leaders, who place high importance on the issue, may process news content differently. According to the two-step flow hypothesis, opinion leaders tend to be more involved in issues compared to others (Eveland & Shah, 2003). This also tells us that online opinion leaders process media messages differently compared to common users. In fact, the internalized processing of news content may be influenced by opinion leaders who consider an issue to be highly important, which is reflected through their judgment of story content. This alteration in processing leads certain individuals to read identical news content as presenting bias one way or the other. This resembles previous applications of hostile media bias, which argue that individuals who are highly involved in issues tend to perceive bias within neutral news coverage of controversial issues (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). Given that opinion leaders are more active in interpreting and spreading the messages to others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), they are also found sensitive to others' opinions and worry others might be more vulnerable to biased information (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006).

In the current study, results showed that Top Fans who closely follow the media on the assigned topic perceived the news article as biased in favor of their own opinion. Two-step flow explains how certain knowledgeable individuals are influenced by media messages and share those messages with others in their community (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Unfortunately, research often fails to assess attention to media content, especially political communication research (Kosicki et al., 2010). Two-step flow theory relies on the importance of opinion leaders absorbing information from the media and sharing it with others, but modern applications must consider the current media environment, which features

multiple perspectives through various outlets. This leads to overestimating the influence of opinion leaders while underestimating the ability of the media to set the tone of a prevailing attitude. Results seen here further showcase the remaining importance of following media and its interaction with opinion leaders, who mediate the flow of messages to audiences (Shah & Scheufele, 2006).

Having a generalized sense of trust in social media platforms emerged as an important factor among common Facebook users (i.e., non-Top Fans). That is ordinary Facebook users who possess a high sense of trust felt the news article agreed with their convictions. While trust in social media platforms is at a record low (Edelman, 2021), having a sense of trust in the platform indicates that users are accepting of news and information received through Facebook. Non-Top Fans may not be the most active news users within the platform (i.e., active users are approached to become Top Fans). Because these users may view themselves as a follower and not as an opinion leader, they may be more impressionable (Turcotte et al., 2015). Because of this, they may be wearier to perceive bias against their own opinion and more willing to accept mediated information because it requires less cognitive effort. On the other hand, for opinion leaders, whether they trust the media or not does not matter because their opinion is strong. Therefore, it does not appear to influence their perception of news bias.

Concerning the influence of their previous experiences on Facebook, results show that, for both Top Fans and common users, regularly viewing comments that agreed with one's own opinion led them to believe that the news story agreed with their point of view. This indicates that the opinion climate on Facebook contributes to their perception of broader public opinion. Specifically, regularly seeing agreeable comments, these individuals believe the majority of others agree with their stance on the issue covered in the news article. Perception of the online opinion environment appears to exert a bandwagon effect that influences their processing of news content. In their investigation of online social news consumers, Wang and Zhu (2019) found that the bandwagon effect exists in interpersonal networks, and "instead of comprehensively considering all the information available, individuals tend to rely on mental shortcuts to make decisions" (p. 42). In this case, users who regularly experience an echo chamber of agreeable comments appear to rely on these previous experiences, which leads them to interpret news content as sharing their own opinion.

Regarding the manipulated comment environment, the content of users' comments appears to strongly influence how opinion leaders view and interpret news content. Specifically, Top Fans who viewed like-minded opinions before reading the news

article were less likely to view the news as biased in favor of their own opinion. It may appear that results seen here concerning the manipulated comments contradict the results of Gearhart et al. (2020) because agreeable comments led opinion leaders to reject the idea that news content favored their position. Yet, harboring the position that news content did not agree with one's own stance is a biased perception, nonetheless.

Among opinion leaders (i.e., Top Fans), the perception that news content was strongly biased against one's opinion after viewing like-minded content may appear counterintuitive. One possible explanation for this may be that opinion leaders are unique and may desire to have a different opinion than others. Individuals with strong opinions aim to serve as a gatekeeper of the information and have been found to be more skeptical of neutral media content (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). On Facebook, Top Fan status represents active users who commonly comment on news articles, which makes news organizations more inclined to award those users with the Top Fan badge (Hutchinson, 2019). The Top Fan badge only appears alongside a user's name and profile image when they interact with that page. For example, a Top Fan of *USA Today* would have their badge visible only when commenting on a post originated by *USA Today* (Facebook, 2020). Therefore, Top Fans may place more weight on their comments than others. These users are inclined to participate in controversial opinion environments where they can express and share their own opinion, which may lead them to biased processing of news content. Further, Top Fans that were exposed to like-minded comments may have been less likely to perceive the news story as biased in favor of their opinion because they sense user comments, not the news story itself, dictate public opinion when it aligns with their own perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Based on what is known about opinion leaders, specifically that they are presumed to be more informed and knowledgeable than others, it would be logical to assume that they would be less susceptible to hostile media perceptions. However, previous studies have tended to examine bias as against one's own, which appear to differ for opinion leaders. Considering that opinion leaders are expected to perform the functions of receiving, interpreting, and evaluating news content, as well as passing it onto others, if they interpret bias it may have implications for how they influence others. Despite the concerns raised about perceptions of media bias, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting results. For instance, participants were recruited via MTurk, which presents a potential source of error due to reliance on monetary incentives and the frequency of participation opportunities offered to users. Further, those Facebook users who hold strong opinions and

have the potential to be opinion leaders might not choose to have a Top Fan badge on Facebook.

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**Book Review: Computer Mediated Communication  
Strategies for Organizations During COVID-19  
Pandemic (Royal Brand, 2021)**

Paul A. Lucas

It goes without saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact on all aspects of everyday life. Oyeniran and Oyeniran (2021), the authors of the book *Computer mediated communication strategies for organizations during COVID-19 pandemic*, make rational and significant attempts to both articulate effective strategies and also express the ways in which businesses can learn permanent applications from temporary efforts meant to deal with the shutdowns. The goal of the book is to offer a possible strategy for Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Overall, the authors' stance toward lessons learned provides readers with valuable insight into how they may consider important organizational procedures.

Though the authors convey that communication was largely becoming mediated, anyway, they start from the point of not wanting businesses to have adverse effects as a result of shifting conditions in working environments. From there, however, the authors move toward an optimistic approach by determining that mediated communication may actually offer some benefit, perhaps even superior, interactional tactics for businesses. These descriptions comprise the majority of the book and are of value to anyone wanting a straightforward comparison between mediated communication versus in-person.

For example, the authors cover "time and distance" (p. 14) and "response times" (p. 27) as key components that mediated communication can overcome, as well as how an online presence for consumers can help businesses as compared with "investing in costly storefronts" (p. 18). They also point out some less-considered benefits, though, such as how "businesses with storefronts can create online stores to expand their visibility" (p. 18) and how individuals "can build a business with someone in another country in a matter of weeks or even days" (p. 25). That is not to say the book is entirely descriptive, because the authors make sure to add a prescriptive model which is detailed at the end of the book.

Specifically, the authors outline a CMC model of communication, along with an account of the pros and cons of that model. They recommend using the strategy, but, with the train of thought that we are all still learning, also suggest that organizations continue to reflect on best practices, as there may be additional CMC models that might be developed. This book, therefore, is helpful for reference since it focuses on practice and could certainly assist

businesses looking to understand or create strategies that might continue to be utilized beyond the shutdowns.

Oyeniran, S., & Oyeniran, O. (2021). *Computer mediated communication strategies for organizations during COVID-19 pandemic*. Columbia, SC: Royal Brand.