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# A study on the presentation of China's COVID-19 news in American mainstream media: party logic and mirror image effect hypothesis

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# **A Study on the Presentation of China's COVID-19 News in American Mainstream Media: Party Logic and Mirror Image Effect Hypothesis**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the partisan tendencies of CNN (Cable News Network) and Fox News (Fox Broadcasting Company) in their reporting on China's COVID-19 pandemic throughout the stages of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Guided by framing and gatekeeping theories to design coding rules, this study conducted a quantitative content analysis of 196 text news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in China published between January 2020 and May 2021 on CNN and Fox News. The Mantel-Haenszel chi-square test, one-way ANOVA test, and least significant difference test were employed for the analysis. The findings indicate that both CNN and Fox News had an overall negative bias in their coverage; however, there was a discernible and increasingly negative trend in CNN's coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic ( $p < 0.05$ ). CNN's tone transitioned from relatively positive before the 2020 U.S. presidential election to sharply negative after President Biden's victory ( $p < 0.05$ ), whereas Fox News maintained a consistently negative tone and significantly reduced its coverage. These patterns suggest that partisan logic strongly shapes international crisis reporting strategies. During this period, trust in domestic health institutions and the government declined among Republican-leaning Americans and increased among Democrat-

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leaning Americans. The study proposes the “mirror image effect hypothesis” to interpret these dynamics: the media strategically narrates international news to prompt reflection on domestic situations, thereby influencing public perceptions. This hypothesis highlights the need for ethical guidelines that go beyond partisan interest in international crisis reporting and highlights the importance of including international news literacy in media education.

Keywords: International news; Partisan Logic; COVID-19 Pandemic; Mirror Image Effect Hypothesis; Elections

## Introduction

The United States, a representative country with a two-party system, has the most influential presidential campaign in the world. Previous studies have revealed that exposure to biased media can influence vote choice (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Gerber et al., 2009). Moreover, empirical studies have shown that news media can persuade some voters to support candidates endorsed by the media (Druckman and Parkin, 2005; Ladd and Lenz, 2009; Chiang and Knight, 2011). Political polarization in the United States remains at historic highs, with more extreme ideological and affective divisions than in other advanced democracies. (Levi et al., 2024), and this polarization is closely associated with the news media. Studies have indicated that individuals tend to favour media outlets that align with their beliefs and predispositions, a phenomenon known as selective exposure. Partisan selective exposure constitutes a significant component of this phenomenon. Recent observational studies have shown that, while selective exposure to politically aligned media exists broadly, the phenomenon of partisan selective exposure is particularly pronounced in the United States (Kobayashi et al., 2024). Empirical research has demonstrated that liberals and Democrats tend to prefer CNN and MSNBC over Fox News, whereas conservatives and Republicans have the opposite preference (Coe et al., 2008; Stroud, 2008). These differences in user preferences could influence the reporting inclinations of both media outlets. For example, Fox News has become closely linked with Republican elected officials and candidates in that it is considered part of the party's extended network (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2018). Republican

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consultant Alex stated, “Fox is the most powerful Republican institution in contemporary American politics” (Lizza, 2016). Although MSNBC is widely acknowledged as the most pro-Democrat media outlet, scholarly research has confirmed CNN’s alignment with Democratic perspectives (McBeth et al., 2018). Pew Research’s survey further highlights that Fox is the most trusted media source among Republicans, with a trust rate of 65%. Conversely, among Democrats and Lean Democrats, Fox faces a significant distrust rate of 61%. In contrast, CNN is the most trusted media outlet among Democrats, enjoying a 65% trust rate, whereas among Republicans and Lean Republicans, it has a distrust rate of 58% (Mark et al., 2020). This trend is particularly apparent during general elections.

The relationship between China and the United States represents one of the paramount bilateral relationships in the world. China-related issues have been a fundamental concern in U.S. presidential elections. For example, due to the differences between the two parties’ trade policies towards China, voters in areas more exposed to trade liberalization with China in 2000 subsequently shifted their support towards Democrats (Che et al., 2022). The 2020 U.S. presidential election occurred amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which became a pivotal campaign issue. President Trump’s pandemic response was widely regarded as ineffective and drew sustained criticism from CNN and other major news organizations.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the partisan tendencies of CNN and Fox, two leading American news organizations, in their coverage of China’s COVID-19 pandemic and examines how these tendencies correspond to the stages of the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

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While prior research on media bias has largely focused on the influence of party affiliation in shaping the framing of domestic issues, this study focuses on international events and investigates how media outlets, recognizing that audiences form judgements about their own government institutions through such coverage, strategically adjust their reporting content in accordance with party logic. Overall, this study's objectives are threefold. First, this study aims to analyse whether and how CNN and Fox News, given their party logic, differed in their tone and volume of coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we examine how these coverage patterns changed across the three key stages of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Third, we propose and preliminarily evaluate the mirror image effect hypothesis as an explanatory framework and explore how international news reporting may be strategically used to influence domestic public opinion. Pursuing these objectives demonstrates how international reporting can be leveraged as a strategic tool in domestic partisan conflicts and offer new insights into the domestic dissemination strategies of international news narratives.

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## Literature Review

### The coverage of China in American media

Scholars have long focused on U.S. media coverage of China, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse its texts. They aim to determine how the media portrays China as a whole or on specific issues, such as the emotional tone, framing strategies, and the rhetoric used. Research has shown that U.S. media outlets often depict China with varying degrees of negativity (Liss, 2003). This negative bias is particularly pronounced on topics related to Chinese ethnic minorities (Wu and Deng, 2010) and Sino-U.S. relations (Zhou and Qin, 2020; Wu, 2021). The way that American media report on China is closely linked to Sino-American relations, U.S. foreign policy, and the international situation (Chang, 1988). In the 1800s, China was portrayed as the cunning and diabolical “Yellow Peril,” and during the Cold War, it was depicted as the ideological, economic, and military “Red Peril” (Kim, 2010; Leong, 2005). As Sino-U.S. relations improved, U.S. media coverage of China experienced a positive shift. For example, during Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, the media used fewer ideological symbols and portrayed China as a culturally rich and friendly nation (Chang, 1988; Wang, 1991). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, from 1990 to 2020, U.S. media coverage of China grew substantially and became more negative (Wang et al., 2023).

When reporting on crisis events involving China, American media outlets often emphasize the Chinese government’s lack of transparency and accuse it of deliberately concealing

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information (Jia & Lu, 2021). This pattern is also evident in public health crises such as the SARS outbreak. Some studies have found that during the SARS outbreak, media coverage of China was more negative, whereas coverage of Vietnam was more positive (Huang & Leung, 2005). During the SARS epidemic, mainstream American media portrayed China as a nation that was incompetent and unwilling to cooperate internationally (Freedman, 2005).

In news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream American media had a clear tendency to depict China as a cultural or racial “other” (Lu et al., 2018). Alshahrani (2021) analysed coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in eight media outlets and found that approximately 76% of all articles were negative towards China, whereas 24% were sympathetic. Jia and Lu (2021) observed that several American media outlets, including the *New York Times*, used rhetorical strategies such as naming, shaming, blaming, and taming in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, thus failing to objectively cover the pandemic as a public health crisis. Mu et al. (2021) noted that although the *New York Times* acknowledged China’s achievements in combating the pandemic, it employed negative terms such as “manipulating” and “aggressively,” portraying China as a threatening and authoritarian country. However, how does the attitude of Republican-leaning media (e.g., Fox News) differ from that of Democratic-leaning media (e.g., CNN) in covering COVID-19 in China? (Q1)

## **Partisan Bias and American Media Coverage of China**

With changes in the general social and media environment, journalistic objectivity is

increasingly regarded as an unattainable ideal, and its viability as a normative standard is being seriously questioned (Boudana, 2011). With the deepening of social divisions, the objective and neutral middle path not only fails to appeal to readers with different perspectives but may also evoke opposing interpretations among the audience. According to Vallone et al. (1985), "Partisans tend to think that the media's coverage of controversial events is unfairly prejudiced and hostile to the positions they support. Both sides believe that the reports may cause neutral audiences to oppose themselves." This phenomenon has been referred to as the "hostile media phenomenon" by researchers. Under the competitive party system in the West, especially in the context of U.S. presidential elections, which is one of the most politically consequential and media-saturated events globally, news organizations are often incentivized to cater to specific partisan ideologies to secure and retain loyal audiences. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) propose that this phenomenon is linked primarily to transformations in the information dissemination landscape. The emergence of a more diverse and readily accessible information environment not only enables consumers to selectively access news aligned with their preferences but also creates a strong economic incentive for news organizations to cater to the political inclinations of their viewers. For instance, the success of Fox News can be attributed to its ability to resonate with conservative audiences that are disillusioned with traditional network television news because they perceive these channels as having a liberal bias (Collins, 2004; Morris, 2007; Kobayashi, et al., 2024). Given that this study is set against the backdrop of increasingly intensifying partisan media strategies during the presidential election, it is pertinent to ask: Is there a discernible correlation

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between the reporting attitudes of Republican-leaning media and Democratic-leaning media and the progression of the U.S. presidential election? (Q2)

Mazzoleni (1987) found that, "There are two contrasting logics behind news coverage: the party logic and the media logic." Party logic emphasizes the structural and cultural resources governing party communications. Consequently, news reports tend to serve a particular position or ideology, effectively becoming the mouthpiece of a party and candidate. The counterpart to party logic is media logic. The concept of media logic was introduced by Altheide and Snow (1979) to describe the powerful workings of media in contemporary society. In a later article, the two authors further defined media logic as a form of communication, the process by which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media (Altheide & Snow, 1991). This logic determines how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication. In news reports, the tension between party logic and media logic lies in whether the news media follows the value of news or focuses on speaking for a particular party. Mazzoleni (1987) analysed coverage of the 1983 Italian general election and found that media logic was more prominent than party logic. Aelst et al. (2008) analysed media reports during the Belgian general election in 2003 and concluded that party logic prevailed over media logic. Simultaneously, scholars note that international news can play a central role in shaping domestic electoral discourse. Segev (2015) found that international issues are often domesticated through partisan frames, serving as symbolic battlegrounds for political actors to

project national leadership competence. Similarly, Gurevitch, Levy, and Roeh (1991) noted that foreign affairs coverage during election periods is frequently filtered through the ideological lens of domestic political concerns and may be used to enhance or undermine the image of particular parties or candidates. Thus, international reporting becomes a reflexive mirror of national political anxieties and ideological competition. A recent study in Foreign Policy Analysis finds that rising populism tends to politicize foreign policy, resulting in partisan media emphasizing international issues that reinforce domestic ideological divides (Cadier, 2024). It is therefore pertinent to ask: How do Democratic and Republican party logics shape media narrative tendencies and strategic framing, respectively, in international news reporting? (Q3)

Whether partisan bias influences media coverage of China is debated. Ha et al. (2020) analysed the coverage of the Sino-American trade conflict by the Chinese and American media. Despite being known for their opposition to the Trump administration, partisan liberal news media such as MSNBC and CNN did not consistently criticize the Trump administration in their coverage of the trade conflict. Wu (2021) found that during the coverage of the Sino-American trade conflict, Republican-leaning media increased the intensity of negative coverage following a shift towards hostile trade policies and reduced it following a shift towards conciliatory policies; Democratic-leaning media exhibited the opposite pattern. Zhang and Trifiro (2022) analysed the texts of reports from 27 major American news media websites and Twitter accounts covering the COVID-19 pandemic in China and found that, compared with liberal media, conservative media tends to adopt more sensational and attitudinal frames. Alshahrani (2021) analysed the texts of eight American

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media outlets with different political biases and their coverage of China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded that there was no definite association between political bias and the positivity or negativity of reporting on China's role in the spread of COVID-19.

Due to significant differences in research topics and media sources, previous studies have reached different conclusions regarding partisan biases in international news coverage. There are three main shortcomings in these studies. First, there is a lack of in-depth, detailed analysis of the underlying reasons for these findings. While some studies suggest a connection between media partisan bias and reporting style, others do not; the reasons for these differing conclusions warrant further exploration. Second, analyses of impact are relatively one-sided. Existing studies focus on the influence of different reporting biases from the perspective of the domestic public perceptions of other countries. However, there is little in-depth discussion of whether these reports are influenced by the reporting country's domestic politics. Third, a theoretically robust explanatory model remains undeveloped. Although theories or hypotheses such as domestication theory, the reverse flow hypothesis, and asymmetrical interdependence have emerged in the field of international news reporting, none of them sufficiently explain how media outlets strategically adjust their reporting content by party logic to respond to how audiences form judgements about their own government institutions through international coverage.

To address these gaps, this study proposes the mirror image effect hypothesis, which posits that international news can be strategically framed to shape public reflection on domestic conditions. This hypothesis seeks to connect international news reporting with audience

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evaluations of their own government's performance, particularly in times of domestic crisis.

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## Research Method

### Research Design

This study employs a comparative quantitative content analysis to investigate how partisan logic influences U.S. media coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic. The research focuses on CNN and Fox News as ideologically representative outlets, and the research design integrates framing theory, gatekeeping theory, and the constructivist perspective to guide the coding and analysis of reporting tone. The study period spans from January 1, 2020, to May 31, 2021, encompassing the duration of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. To identify partisan patterns over time, the study divides the timeline into three distinct election-related stages.

### Research Sample

The article selected CNN and Fox news reports on the pandemic in China from January 1, 2020, to May 31, 2021, as research samples. These two media outlets are frequently selected as comparative cases in academic research due to their consistent divergence in framing identical events in both international and domestic news coverage.

For example, Glover (2011) found that, during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, CNN portrayed the Muslim Brotherhood as a potential threat to democratic ideals while also acknowledging its possible positive contributions to Egypt's political system. This balanced approach reflects the Democratic Party's more cautious and diversified strategy in handling international affairs,

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particularly political movements in the Islamic world. In contrast, Fox News depicted the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to both democratic ideals and American interests. This emphasis on security and counterterrorism issues aligns with the Republican Party's typically hardline stance on international politics and security matters (Glover, 2011).

In terms of domestic affairs, Ensor's research found that CNN was more direct in its criticism of President Trump and its ideological and political stance in its reporting leaned towards the Democratic Party. Their coverage often criticized the Republican Party, and the guests they invited and topics they chose to discuss were usually aligned with Democratic policies and positions. In contrast, Fox News exhibited the opposite trend. This research discussed the phenomenon of partisan logic in CNN and Fox News' reporting (Ensor, 2018).

The inherent party logic of Fox News and CNN renders them ideal subjects for examining whether partisan influence exists in American media coverage of China's pandemic. To extract data, the researchers used Python scripts to crawl Fox News's and CNN's health sections with the keywords "coronavirus + China" and "COVID-19 + China," capturing 4,272 articles from Fox News and 4,167 articles from CNN between January 1, 2020, and May 31, 2021.

The use of the keywords "coronavirus + China" and "COVID-19 + China" ensures a high degree of coverage and relevance for the sample. First, "coronavirus" and "COVID-19" are the primary and most widely adopted terms in both journalistic and public discourse to refer to the pandemic. Second, appending "China" effectively narrows the search for articles specifically addressing the country in question, given China's central role as the initial epicentre of the

pandemic and subsequent focus of global reporting. Since mainstream media outlets typically adhere to widely recognized terms in their headlines and leads for maximum visibility and searchability, the chosen keywords are highly likely to capture nearly all relevant articles on this topic. Moreover, preliminary testing and cross-referencing with manual searches of both outlets' archives revealed negligible omissions, confirming that articles of significance overwhelmingly use these terms or their close variants. Therefore, the keyword strategy not only maximizes comprehensiveness and representativeness but also ensures the validity of the dataset for analysing partisan framing in the coverage of China's pandemic.

The researchers recruited three junior students pursuing double majors in journalism and English. Under the guidance of the researchers, they filtered and excluded a total of 8,439 news articles based on the following criteria:

To exclude weakly related reports, the study used Python scripts to implement a keyword co-occurrence frequency filter, ensuring that the retained articles were highly relevant to the research topic. Before the keyword co-occurrence frequency threshold was finalized, a preliminary trial analysis was conducted to ensure that the filtering criteria would maximize both the relevance and comprehensiveness of the sample.

First, a representative subset of 50 to 100 articles retrieved using the initial keyword search was randomly selected. Each article in this subset was analysed using Python scripts to automatically count the occurrences of the keywords "COVID-19," "coronavirus," "China," and "Wuhan." Members of the research team also manually reviewed each article to subjectively assess

whether its primary focus was on China's COVID-19 pandemic or whether references to China or Wuhan were merely coincidental. For example, some articles mentioned only China when reporting on the pandemic in other countries or discussed the pandemic situation in China at its early or end stages. The results from the automated keyword counts were then compared with the manual relevance assessments. The articles were categorized into "highly relevant" and "weakly relevant or irrelevant". The distributions of keyword co-occurrence frequencies in these two groups were examined. Highly relevant articles typically contained five or more mentions of the relevant keywords, whereas weakly relevant articles generally fell below this threshold. For borderline cases, particularly those with four occurrences, further manual review and team discussion were undertaken to determine whether these articles should be included. After comparison and discussion, a threshold of five combined keyword mentions was selected as the optimal balance to effectively filter out irrelevant content without excluding significant articles. This preliminary analysis validated the filtering strategy and provided empirical support for the threshold used in the full dataset, ensuring that subsequent analyses were conducted on a highly relevant and representative sample. Finally, after excluding weakly related reports, 531 articles from CNN and 158 articles from Fox News remained. This filtering stage ensured that subsequent analyses were based on highly relevant texts.

To ensure the objectivity and accuracy of this analysis, the study focuses solely on pure news reports and excludes news commentary, interviews, and analyses. These types of content often contain a significant amount of subjective opinion, which can blur the line between factual

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reporting and commentary. Analysing different types of texts together could introduce bias, as commentaries and analyses often contain strong personal opinions or stances, which conflicts with our aim of comparing objective news content. Similar studies also recommend selecting only original news reports, excluding editorials, interview transcripts, and similar formats, to avoid interference from content and tone heterogeneity (Mach et al., 2021).

To achieve this, we filtered articles based on the tags and attributes provided by the media outlets by examining how the articles were categorized on their websites and identifying indicative keywords in titles or leads. Any content labelled as commentary, opinion, column, or interview transcript was systematically excluded from the dataset. The final research sample consisted of 100 articles from CNN and 96 articles from Fox News (Table 1).

## **Research Coding**

To ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the coding process, the research team conducted a structured coder training program before commencing the formal analysis. The program included a multistep calibration process. The first step is an introduction to the tone-coding framework, with detailed definitions and real-world examples of “positive,” “neutral,” and “negative” reporting on China. Next, the team conducted joint review sessions using pilot articles, where the coders practised scoring and discussed discrepancies. Finally, the coding manual was iteratively refined by adding clarifications for ambiguous cases to ensure that all the coders interpreted the guidelines consistently. To minimize the influence of individual bias, the coders were explicitly instructed to

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disregard their personal or political opinions and to code tone strictly based on content type and framing within each paragraph.

This coding approach is grounded in three key theories from media studies. First, framing theory posits that the media shape audiences' perceptions of events through the selection, emphasis, and omission of certain information. Even when reporting objective facts, the media can still guide audiences towards forming either positive or negative judgements about the subject of the report (Entman, 1993). Second, gatekeeping theory suggests that the media serve as "gatekeepers" in the communication process, determining which information enters public discourse and how it is presented. (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For example, consistently selecting negative facts over positive facts from the pool of available news highlights an inherent bias in the gatekeeping process. Third, the constructivist view of journalism holds that news is not a direct mirror of reality but rather a constructed representation of "social reality" shaped by how media report and contextualize (McQuail, 2010). Thus, even if the reported facts are true, they are presented in ways that are not necessarily objective. Analysing media bias, therefore, cannot be limited to identifying overtly subjective language; it must also consider how the choice of which "true" facts to report (and which to omit) helps construct a particular social reality. In summary, media outlets' choices in news reporting inevitably reflect their institutional or ideological positions. (Table 2)

Initial intercoder reliability was tested on a randomly selected set of 160 paragraphs, yielding a Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) of 0.773 (substantial agreement). The research team then held extensive collaborative meetings to resolve any coding inconsistencies, meticulously reviewing

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and refining the coding rules to eliminate potential misunderstandings. Their commitment was evident, as they painstakingly coded each of the 196 articles with precision and attention to detail. The new round of independently coded Cohen's kappa was 0.919 (almost perfect agreement). For each article on China's pandemic news, the overall reporting direction is determined by the sum of its paragraph scores: a positive total indicates a positive direction, whereas a negative total indicates a negative one. The magnitude of the summed score reflects the degree of positivity or negativity. To account for variations in article length, the study also calculates an average tone score per paragraph by dividing an article's total tone score by its number of paragraphs, providing a normalized indicator of the article's reporting tone.

## **Data Analysis**

The study found that from January 2020 through May 2021, both media outlets tended to report news about the pandemic in China in a negative light: CNN had a total score of -32 for all stories and a total average paragraph score of -2.07 while Fox News had a total score of -188 for all stories and a total average paragraph score of -13.23. (Q1)

On April 8, 2020, Biden officially became the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, and on November 3, voting for the 59th U.S. presidential election ended, with Biden receiving more than half of the votes on November 7. Based on this electoral timeline, this study divides outlets' China pandemic coverage into three phases to examine how partisan logic influenced their reporting. The three phases are the preelection period (January 1, 2020, to April 8, 2020), the public

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opinion propaganda period (April 9, 2020 to November 7, 2020), and the beginning of President Biden's term (November 7, 2020 to May 31, 2021). January 1, 2020, marked the beginning of the U.S. election year, and April 8 was when Biden was chosen as the Democratic candidate. During this period, the media coverage focused on the Democratic and Republican party primaries. The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 also became a global focal point, which may have influenced the political inclination and focus of news reports.

The public opinion propaganda period lasted from April 9, 2020, to November 7, 2020. Political activities in the U.S. peaked from April 9, 2020, when Biden was elected as the Democratic candidate, to November 7, 2020, when the U.S. election voting ended. This period included, but was not limited to, policy discussions within and outside the parties, debates between presidential candidates, and extensive promotion of candidates' policy positions. Evaluations of China and its pandemic management became part of both the political offense and defence in the U.S. election. During this time, pandemic coverage was not only for information dissemination but also potentially a tool for shaping public opinion and supporting specific political candidates.

The beginning of President Biden's term ranged from November 7, 2020, to May 31, 2021. On November 7, 2020, voting the U.S. presidential election ended, with Biden securing the majority of votes. On December 14, 2020, Biden was confirmed as the U.S. President-elect, and he was inaugurated on January 20, 2021. The period from the end of the election to President Biden's official inauguration and the start of his term marked a transition in politics. The three phases of coverage by the two media outlets are listed in the table below.

The Mantel-Haenszel chi-square test (Table 3) is appropriate for examining whether a significant linear trend exists across ordinal groups in categorical variables. In this study, a test was performed to investigate how CNN and Fox News' reporting tendencies on the COVID-19 situation in China evolved across the phases of the U.S. presidential election. Specifically, the results of the Mantel-Haenszel chi-square test for CNN's reporting ( $p = .045$ ) suggest a statistically significant linear relationship between the directions of CNN's reports and the stage of the election. Additionally, the Pearson's R value ( $R = .194$ ), calculated using the Pearson correlation coefficient, with a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ , indicates a statistically significant negative correlation between the directions of CNN's reporting and the specific stage of the election in which the article is positioned. These findings strongly suggest that as the election process progressed, there was a discernible and increasingly negative trend in CNN's coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, the test was also conducted for Fox's reporting, and the results indicate that its direction was not significantly related to their election stage. Fox's reporting bias remained relatively constant and did not undergo substantial changes throughout the course of the election process. (Q2)

There is a decreasing trend for both CNN and Fox News in terms of the number of China-related pandemic reports over time. A linear regression analysis was conducted to further test for a significant temporal trend in report frequency. Months were coded from 1 to 17, allowing us to model the relationship between coverage volume and time. The correlation test results for showed that  $R = .671$ ,  $R^2 = .450$ ,  $F = 12.291$ , and  $p = .003$ , suggesting a gradual decline in coverage of

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China's COVID-19 situation as the election approached. This trend reflects a deliberate media strategy with clear real-world implications. Similarly, test results for Fox News are  $R = .661$ ,  $R^2 = .437$ ,  $F = 8.545$ ,  $p = .014$ , and there is a linear relationship between the two. The frequency of reports related to China's COVID-19 pandemic by these two media outlets is evidently associated with the progress of the electoral campaign. Notably, CNN's coverage has a more pronounced correlation with the changing dates.

The scores of the CNN ( $n = 100$ ) articles in different stages (see the previous division) were analysed by one-way ANOVA. One-way ANOVA is employed to test whether there are significant differences in reporting scores by CNN and Fox News across election phases to determine whether reporting tendencies are significantly influenced by the electoral timeline. Firstly, the results of the Levene's test of homogeneity of variances (Table 4) support the homogeneity assumption. The results of the one-way ANOVA test indicate that CNN's reporting tendency varied not only significantly in a statistical sense but also meaningfully in practical terms, suggesting that its coverage of China's pandemic was notably shaped by the electoral context (Table 5).

In contrast, Fox's reporting did not show a statistically significant difference across election phases with a small effect size, indicating that its stance remained relatively stable throughout the election period with minimal strategic adjustments.

To clarify which specific election phases exhibited significant differences that were identified in the ANOVA, the least significant difference (LSD) test (Table 6) was employed. The results revealed significant differences in CNN's coverage scores between Stages 1 and 2 compared with

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Stage 3. This implies a discernible correlation between the different stages of the general election and the scores assigned to the articles. Therefore, it can be concluded that CNN's coverage direction is indeed associated with the distinct stages of the campaign. An analysis of the scores of the Fox News articles ( $n=100$ ) across the previously defined stages revealed nonsignificant results. Thus, there is no statistically significant association between the different stages of the general election and the scores of the Fox News articles. Consequently, it can be inferred that Fox's coverage direction does not exhibit a clear correlation with the stages of the campaign.

Taken together, the results suggest that partisan logic shaped not only the tone but also the timing and intensity of international news coverage. CNN appears to have used its early reporting on China to critique the Trump administration and later reduced positive coverage to avoid challenging the Biden administration. On the other hand, Fox News downplayed China-related coverage once conditions in the U.S. worsened, likely to minimize unfavourable comparisons. (Q3)

These patterns posit that media use international news not only to shape perceptions of foreign affairs but also to indirectly influence audiences' evaluations of their own country. CNN's tonal shifts and Fox's selective silence demonstrate how media narratives about foreign crises can become instruments of domestic political positioning. By portraying China as either a success or a threat at different electoral moments, both networks indirectly shaped how audiences reflected on American governance, pandemic management, and national leadership.

## Research Findings

This study conducted a comprehensive quantitative content analysis of 196 news articles to examine how partisan logic shaped their coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020 U.S. presidential election cycle.

The results showed that both CNN and Fox News maintained a generally negative tone, but Fox's negativity was markedly more extreme and consistent. CNN displayed fluctuations in tone, whereas Fox's coverage was strongly negative throughout the period. CNN's reporting tone shifted significantly across the three phases of the election. The Mantel-Haenszel chi-square test and ANOVA results indicated that CNN became more negative over time, with a statistically significant correlation between reporting direction and election stage. Post hoc LSD tests further confirmed that coverage in Stage 3 was significantly more negative than that of previous stages. Fox News, however, did not show such variation, implying a fixed editorial stance. Linear regression revealed a decline in the number of pandemic-related articles over time, particularly for CNN and Fox, suggesting a strategic de-emphasis of China's COVID-19 as domestic political conditions evolved.

Additionally, the mirror image effect hypothesis, which posits that international news reporting is strategically framed to shape domestic audience perceptions and construct context-specific political meaning, could be introduced.

## The Mirror Image Effect Hypothesis in International News Reporting

This study introduces and applies the mirror image effect hypothesis in international news reporting to elucidate the influence of international news reports on domestic audiences. The hypothesis builds upon the concept of a strategic narrative—the idea that media organizations selectively frame international events to serve specific communicative goals within domestic political contexts. The first layer of the mirror image effect hypothesis highlights that international news reports prompt the audience to reflect on the situation in their country, thereby shaping a positive or negative evaluation of the relevant situation in their country. Previous studies have analysed the impact of international news reports on their audiences from the standpoint of agenda setting and the second level of agenda setting. Scholars have pointed out that for the American public, the more media coverage a country receives, the more important it is perceived to be in terms of U.S. interests. Similarly, the more negative media coverage a country receives, the more likely respondents are to hold a negative view of that country (Wanta et al., 2004). However, these studies only explore the impact of international news reports on the audience's perception of the reported country, without investigating whether reports on foreign failure or crisis may lead to increased national self-confidence or complacency.

The hypothesis is derived from Cooley's "looking glass self" theory, which emphasizes that a person's self-concept is shaped by the evaluations and opinions of others and that people form their self-concept through their interactions with others (Cooley, 2017). The "looking glass self" informs the mirror image effect hypothesis, which posits that domestic audiences can interpret

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international news as a symbolic mirror, using it to assess, criticize, or affirm their society. The mirror image effect is more pronounced when there is a large gap between the reported situation in a foreign country and the situation in the home country. For example, if a country's media reports on another country's technological development, then it may prompt audiences to compare the reported country's technological level with their own countries, thus raising doubts and concerns about their home country's situation. If the media frequently reports on social unrest and security incidents in foreign countries, then it may raise the audience's awareness of their country's security situation. In this way, international news becomes a powerful vehicle for shaping national self-perception, not just through direct comparison but also through emotionally and politically charged contrasts.

In the first election phase, CNN published 51 reports on China's COVID-19 pandemic, 52.9% positive and 35.3% negative, yielding a total score of 30. Fox News released 77 such reports, 20.8% positive and 58.4% negative, with a total score of -157. (Table 7)

Comparatively, during the first phase of the election, Fox News's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China was more negative than CNN's. According to data from the Pew Research Center, in March 2020, 84% of Republicans and those leaning towards the Republican Party believed the government did an excellent job in public health, whereas the figure for Democrats and those leaning towards the Democratic Party was 74%. By the end of the second stage of the presidential election, this figure had dropped to 58% among Republicans and those who leaned Republican, whereas it remained relatively stable at 75% among Democrats and Democrat leaners.

(Funk et al., 2022). Meanwhile, public trust in President Trump, including among Republicans and Republican leaners, also declined, with his approval rating peaking in March 2020 and then steadily decreasing. (Scott, 2021) The shift in the coverage strategies of Fox News and CNN regarding China's COVID-19 pandemic corresponded closely with these trends. In the early stages of the outbreak, Republicans and Republican leaners were more exposed to negative news about China's response, which contributed to a more favourable evaluation of their own government and of President Trump. However, as the pandemic spread within the United States and the public realized that they had, in some sense, been misled, attitudes began to shift, and mainstream media reporting strategies changed as well. Fox News reduced the volume of its coverage on China's pandemic situation, thereby reducing Republicans' attention to the issue, whereas CNN increased the negativity of its coverage of China's COVID-19 response, potentially easing the burden on the incoming Biden administration regarding pandemic policy. This dynamic corresponds to the second level of the mirror image effect hypothesis.

The second level of the mirror image effect hypothesis postulates that news media are not merely passive conveyors of international events but are consciously aware of how their coverage can influence domestic audiences. Accordingly, they tend to adopt a strategic narrative in reporting international news. These strategic narratives are primarily evident in news selection, news sources, and reporting themes. The concept of a strategic narrative is the foundation of an analytical framework for studying how influence operates through mass communication in international affairs (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014). Narratives selectively emphasize certain

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aspects of reality while omitting others (Subotić, 2016) to direct audiences towards the narrator's desired vision of the future (Szostek, 2018). From the perspective of communication and the political economy, news media are subject to political and economic interests and often serve as vassals of political and economic power.

As the election progressed, CNN and Fox News' coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic revealed contrasting narrative strategies aligned with their partisan orientations. During the early stage (January-April 2020), CNN's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China was relatively positive, highlighting China's rapid containment measures and international assistance. This positive portrayal implicitly accentuated the Trump administration's inadequate domestic response, thereby contributing to Democratic campaign narratives. After the election, however, CNN's tone became markedly more negative, potentially to prevent favourable comparisons that could undermine public support for the newly elected Biden administration. This temporal shift underscores CNN's use of international news as a mirror through which domestic governance was indirectly evaluated. In contrast, Fox News had a consistent tone but shifted dramatically in volume. Its coverage of China's COVID-19 outbreak was concentrated primarily in January and February 2020, a period in which the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States was relatively low and tens of thousands of people in China had already been infected with the virus. These early reports, which were often negative, coincided with former President Trump's framing of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus." As the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States began to increase exponentially in March 2020, schools and factories were forced to shut down.

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Moreover, the situation in China was gradually improving, with factories and schools resuming operations. Fox News significantly reduced its reporting on China. Highlighting China's success could have inadvertently drawn attention to the Trump administration's failures, thus conflicting with the network's ideological alignment. This strategic reduction illustrates how selective silence can also be a form of narrative control.

In terms of the influence of media coverage on international events, political pressure, and media self-censorship, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Hallin, 1989) and *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Gitlin, 2003) are two influential works. Both of these works study events that are directly related to the United States, whereas China's COVID-19 pandemic is an event occurring in a distant country with no direct relevance to the American public. This distinction in research focus marks a significant difference between this paper and the aforementioned works. The primary focus of this paper is to examine whether news media are influenced by political ideology when reporting news about other countries that are not directly related to their nation and how news media can influence audiences through such international news coverage. To address these questions, this paper proposes the mirror image effect hypothesis in international news reporting. This distinction makes it possible to isolate partisan motivations in framing decisions, independent of national self-interest or direct threat. It offers a new vantage point for understanding how political ideology mediates the representation of foreign others to serve domestic ends.

It is also worth distinguishing the mirror image effect hypothesis from the widely used

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concept of domestication in international news studies. To make local audiences concerned about events that occur in distant places, journalists need to change the ‘wild state’ of these events, reconstruct their meaning, and make them relevant to their local audiences (Gurevitch & Levy, 2005). Domestication mainly emphasizes the use of certain methods and strategies by journalists and editors to make events more familiar, attractive, and understandable. The mirror image effect hypothesis focuses on how audiences receive international news and how this reception reflexively shapes their perceptions of their society. It involves the domestic audience’s cognitive and emotional responses to international events and how these responses affect domestic affairs.

## Discussion

The analysis reveals that while both outlets adopted a predominantly negative stance towards China's pandemic management, Fox News's coverage was consistently and strongly negative across all stages. In contrast, CNN displayed a more dynamic pattern: its reporting tone was relatively positive in the early stages of the election period and become more negative following Biden's election victory. These changes correspond with the progression of the U.S. presidential election and illustrate how party logic influences the construction of international news narratives (Table 6).

### **Domestic Political Factors and Policy Implications for International News Reporting**

During the Trump administration, CNN's positive reporting of China's containment success implicitly criticized the Republican government's failure to manage the domestic outbreak. However, once Biden secured the presidency, continued praise of China's pandemic performance could have invited negative comparisons and public dissatisfaction with the Democratic administration, so CNN shifted to a negative tone. This strategic adjustment in CNN's narrative aligns with our finding of a surge in post-election negativity.

On the other hand, Fox News remained uniformly negative in tone but varied in coverage volume. It extensively covered China's outbreak when highlighting China's troubles served to deflect from U.S. issues and then substantially reduced its coverage once China's situation

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improved and the U.S. faced a severe outbreak. This selective silence suggests an alternative form of agenda control consistent with partisan objectives and mirrors our quantitative finding that Fox News's stories on China decreased sharply as the U.S. pandemic worsened.

This study preliminarily verified this hypothesis in the context of international news reporting by analysing the coverage of CNN and Fox News. Prior research has acknowledged the impact of domestic factors on international reporting. However, most studies have focused primarily on the direct influence of political power, economic power, and other factors on news media (Gurevitch & Levy, 2005; Ruigrok & Van Atteveldt, 2007; Hafez, 2004). For example, in authoritarian countries, rulers may review international news reports in the form of government orders to regulate the dissemination of information and consolidate their power. More recent work, such as *Unreported Realities: The Political Economy of Media-Sourced Data* (Parkinson, 2024), underscores that journalists' choices about coverage content and emphasis are shaped not only by direct media ownership or government pressure but also by broader political and economic dynamics. However, while such perspectives highlight the external constraints and institutional logics that shape news production, they tend to overlook how international news can act as a strategic lever for shaping domestic audience perceptions and political narratives. The mirror image effect hypothesis expands the scope of research on international news reporting by shifting the focus from the international events themselves to the impact of international news reporting on domestic audiences. It examines how news about other countries, which are unrelated to one's own country, shapes domestic audiences' attitudes and perceptions towards domestic issues.

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Furthermore, the hypothesis explains how the influence of international news on audiences can shape the way that media reports are produced. Therefore, this study provides a new perspective and research direction for the study of international news reporting.

Moreover, this study analyses U.S. media coverage of China's COVID-19 pandemic news from the perspective of journalistic objectivity, which is another innovation. In the past, many scholars have analysed the party logic of news media during elections, but most of them focused on analysing domestic news, and some only limited their perspective to election-related news (Mazzoleni, 1987; Aelst et al., 2008). Our findings indicate that similar biases extend into international coverage.

These findings lend support to the proposed mirror image effect hypothesis. The mirror image effect hypothesis underscores how international events are not merely reported but rather constructed in ways that reflect and reinforce ideological interests at home. Our results suggest that international news (China's pandemic in this case) was framed in ways that encouraged the audience to draw comparisons with their own country's situation, fulfilling a "mirror" function. We observed media behaviour, such as the CNN's tone reversal and Fox News's coverage reduction, which is consistent with using foreign news to influence domestic public opinion, exactly as the mirror image effect hypothesizes. Thus, the discussion of this hypothesis is directly grounded in empirical patterns.

In light of these findings, we emphasize the need for ethical countermeasures. The politicization of pandemic-related news, information that ideally should serve the global public

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interest, undermines collective crisis response. Normative frameworks must be established to ensure that international news reporting transcends partisan agendas.

News organizations should set up a special international news review internal committee to evaluate international news production ensure editorial independence in story selection, sourcing, and tone, and mitigate partisan bias. Moreover, media industry associations or third-party research institutes should systematically assess the reporting tendencies of major outlets and publish regular evaluations to promote transparency and accountability in international journalism. In addition, media literacy education must be redefined in the context of globalization. Audiences should be equipped not only to decode ideological bias in domestic reporting but also to critically assess the national and partisan framing of international news. Developing curriculum frameworks that address international news media literacy is an essential direction for future research and education.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has certain limitations. The sample was restricted to two major media outlets: CNN and Fox News. More media outlets should be included. Considering the influence of American media on Chinese audiences, this study selected Fox News and CNN as representative outlets for comparison, given their ideological divergence and prominence in U.S. political discourse. Although MSNBC is widely regarded as the most pro-Democratic outlet, it was excluded from the sample. This exclusion may have limited the diversity of the research sample. However, future studies should consider incorporating a broader range of media outlets to improve sample

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comprehensiveness and capture a fuller spectrum of partisan media dynamics. Methodologically, this study relied primarily on quantitative content analysis of news texts. While this approach enabled systematic comparisons across media and time, there was a lack of interviews and surveys with media practitioners and audiences, limiting our understanding of both audience reception and the internal decision-making processes that shape international reporting. Additionally, due to the reliance on automated filtering using keyword co-occurrence thresholds, a small number of articles in which thematically relevant content appeared using synonymous or co-referential terms (e.g., “Hubei Province” instead of “Wuhan” or “China”) may have been inadvertently excluded. These omissions highlight a limitation of rule-based keyword filtering, where semantically related but lexically varied expressions can fall outside the inclusion criteria. Future research should therefore employ mixed-methods approaches, integrating in-depth interviews, audience surveys, and ethnographic observations to triangulate the findings and assess media impact more holistically.

Furthermore, the mirror image effect is proposed here as a working hypothesis that demands further empirical validation. It is crucial for future studies to test this framework across different geopolitical contexts (e.g., coverage of Russia, the Middle East) and in response to other issue domains, such as climate change, technological innovation, or global security. Comparative studies between Western and non-Western media systems could also offer valuable insight into whether the mirror image effect functions universally or is shaped by specific media cultures.

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## Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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## **Data Availability Statement**

The data and Python code that support the findings of this study are publicly available on <https://zenodo.org/records/15333727>, Zenodo.

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## Ethical Approval Statement

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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## Informed Consent Statement

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

**Table 1**  
China-related pandemic Articles of CNN and Fox

Date	Articles of CNN	Articles of Fox News
Jan 2020	24	29
Feb 2020	13	40
Mar 2020	11	6
Apr 2020	12	5
May 2020	4	3
Jun 2020	2	0
Jul 2020	1	0
Aug 2020	2	2

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Sep 2020	4	2
Oct 2020	4	0
Nov 2020	2	2
Dec 2020	6	2
Jan 2021	4	2
Feb 2021	4	1
Mar 2021	2	0
Apr 2021	2	1
May 2021	3	1

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*Note.* Based on 8,439 news articles collected from the health sections of Fox News and CNN between January 1, 2020 and May 31, 2021, using the keywords “Coronavirus + China” and “COVID-19 + China”. The final research sample was obtained after filtering.

Table 2

Tone Coding Scheme for News Paragraphs

Code	Tone Category	Criteria	Theoretical Foundation	Full Example
-1	Negative Point Tone	The paragraph contains negative content about China or Chinese institutions. This includes issues such as the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic, poor control, restricted speech, external concerns and doubts, and a negative description of life scenarios.	Framing Theory: Emphasis on negative facts guides perception Gatekeeping Theory: Preference for negative news reflects editorial bias	“China’s early suppression of whistleblowers and lack of transparency in the initial stages of the outbreak have fueled global outrage and undermined trust in its official statistics.” “This larger figure was never fully revealed at that time, as China’s accounting system seemed, in the tumult of the early weeks of the pandemic, to downplay the severity of the outbreak.” (Gan et al., 2020)
0	Neutral Point Tone	The paragraph either does not mention China/Chinese institutions or contains only factual, explanatory, or supplementary information (such as the analysis of policy). No evaluative or emotionally charged language is used.	Constructivist Journalism: Not all facts are framed, but neutrality requires lack of evaluative context	“As of Thursday afternoon, the virus had infected more than 218,800 people worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University, which is tracking cases reported by the World Health Organization and additional sources. That’s more than double the total two weeks ago.” (Westcott and Wang, 2020)
1	Positive Point Tone	The paragraph contains positive content about China or Chinese institutions. Examples include China offering aid to other countries, achievements in pandemic control, introduction of effective	Framing Theory: Selection of positive content promotes favourable interpretation Constructivist Journalism: Positive narratives are actively constructed, not accidental	“On Wednesday, the French foreign ministry announced it had received about a million face masks from the Chinese government.” “Medical teams and supplies from China have also been sent to Italy, which has already seen nearly 3,000 deaths from the virus.” (Westcott and Wang, 2020)

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policies, and positive everyday scenarios.

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Table 3  
Phased coverage of the China outbreak news by CNN and Fox

Stage	Reports of CNN			Reports of Fox News		
	Positive Scores	Negative Scores	Zero Score	Positive Scores	Negative Scores	Zero Score
Stage1	27(55.1)	18(42.9)	6(66.7)	16(76.2)	45(83.3)	16(76.2)
Stage2	16(32.7)	10(23.8)	0(0.0)	4(19.0)	3(5.6)	3(14.3)
Stage3	6(12.2)	14(33.3)	3(33.3)	1(4.8)	6(11.1)	2(9.5)
Total	49(100.0)	42(100.0)	9(100.0)	21(100.0)	54(100.0)	21(100.0)
$\chi^2$	3.95*			0.061		
$R$	-.194*			-.025		

*Note.* \* $p<0.05$ . The data represent phased news coverage categorized by reporting tones (positive, negative, neutral) across the three defined election stages. Coverage from CNN (n = 100 articles) and Fox (n = 96 articles) was analysed for the period spanning from January 1, 2020, to May 31, 2021.

Table 4

Test of Homogeneity

	Levene Statistic	Df1	Df2	Sig.
CNN	2.703	2	97	.072
Fox	.522	2	93	.595

*Note.* The table displays the results from Levene's test of homogeneity of variances conducted to validate the ANOVA assumptions. The analysis was based on data of CNN ( $n = 100$ ) and Fox News ( $n = 96$ ) coverage across election stages.

Table 5  
Results of the One-way ANOVA test

		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.	$\eta^2$
CNN	Between groups	251.032	2	125.516	4.206*	.018	0.08
	Within groups	2894.728	97	29.843			
	Total	3145.760	99				
Fox	Between groups	52.050	2	26.025	.896	.411	0.02
	Within groups	2699.783	93	29.030			
	Total	2751.833	95				

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ . Results from the one-way ANOVA test for significant differences in the average article scores across the three election stages. CNN's coverage ( $n = 100$  articles) was significantly different ( $p < .05$ ), whereas the Fox's coverage ( $n = 96$  articles) was not.

Table 6  
Multiple comparisons of CNN's coverage across election stages

(I) Stage	(J) Stage	Mean	Std.Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		Difference (I-J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	.127	1.316	.924	-2.49	2.74
	3	3.806*	1.372	.007	1.08	6.53
2	1	-.127	1.316	.924	-2.74	2.49
	3	3.679*	1.564	.021	.58	6.78
3	1	-3.806*	1.372	.007	-6.53	-1.08
	2	-3.679*	1.564	.021	-6.78	-.58

*Note.* The results of the least significant difference (LSD) post hoc comparisons from the ANOVA on CNN's reporting across three election stages. Differences marked with \* are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

Table 7  
Scoring of CNN and Fox News' reporting at different stages

Stage	Reports of CNN			Reports of Fox		
	Number of reports	Total score of reports	The sum of the average scores of paragraphs in each article	Number of reports	Total score of reports	The sum of the average scores of paragraphs in each article
Stage1	51	30	1.98	77	-157	-9.86
Stage2	26	12	1.74	10	-1	-0.5
Stage3	23	-74	-2.16	9	-30	-2.82

*Note.* Scores indicate reporting tones for CNN and Fox News across the three election stages. The table presents the number of reports, total paragraph-level scores, and sum of the average paragraph scores per article for each stage, collected from articles published between January 1, 2020, and May 31, 2021.