

The virus of fear and anxiety: China, COVID-19, and the Australian media

Global Media and China

2021, Vol. 6(1) 24–39

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DOI: 10.1177/2059436421988977

journals.sagepub.com/home/gch



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Abstract

This article analyses Australian media's coverage of China's efforts to contain COVID-19. The article is a critical discourse analysis of the major news stories, documentaries, opinions, and analyses published in the entire array of Australian media, including both television and radio programs from the taxpayer-funded public broadcaster the ABC, commercial media outlets such as Murdoch's *The Australian newspaper* and Nine Entertainment's *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and several tabloid papers. By identifying the key themes, perspectives, and angles used in these reports and narratives, this article finds that the more credible media outlets have mostly framed China's efforts in political and ideological terms, rather than as an issue of public health. In comparison, the tabloid media—including commercial television, shock jock radio, and newspapers—have resorted to conspiratorial, racist, and Sino-phobic positions. In both instances, the coverage of China's experience is a continuation and embodiment of the “China threat” and “Chinese influence” discourses that have now dominated the Australian media for a number of years.

Keywords

Anti-Chinese racism, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian media, China, COVID-19, discourse of China threat, discourse of Chinese influence, Nine Entertainment Co., tabloid media

Australia is an Oceanic country with geographical proximity to both Asia and the Pacific. China has long been Australia's biggest trading partner, contributing close to AUD\$200 billion worth of imports and exports (Chau, 2019). Australia's economic prosperity has been crucially dependent on its capacity to sell iron ore, coal, beef, wine, and dairy to China, as well as attracting tourists and

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international students from China. Although located in the southern hemisphere, Australia identifies culturally and politically with the “global West.” More than ever before, Australia has had to reckon with the fact that its economic prosperity relies on a country that, in the words of Australia’s longtime defense analyst Hugh White, is not “Anglo-Saxon” (quoted in Clark, 2018), and is not a liberal democracy. Australia sees itself as a middle power, and with the United States and China increasingly at loggerheads with each other, finds itself caught between the two. As Australia’s former secretary of the Department of Defense Dennis Richardson (2017) put it, “Australia is friends with both, ally of one.” All these factors ensure that China is Australia’s biggest conundrum, and this “China Conundrum”—can’t live with you, can’t live without you—inevitably makes China Australia’s biggest media story.

China has increasingly adopted an assertive position on the global stage, with its widely and openly declared “going global” agenda aimed at globalizing Chinese media and projecting a more attractive image of China (Sun, 2015). This has bred a pervasive sense of fear about China’s political and economic influence in Australia, manifesting in an acceleration of anti-Chinese public discourses in the past few years (e.g. Hamilton, 2018; Hartcher, 2019). In the words of one commentator, “anti-China sentiment in Australia risks becoming a national pastime” (Camilleri, 2020). The “China influence” narrative is, in the words of Australia’s former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans (2020), “careering out of control in Australia, as evidenced in a daily drumbeat of hostile mainstream media articles.” Manifesting this anxiety, there has been a noticeable shift toward what has been called “adversarial journalism” (ABC Radio, 2019; Sun, 2019a) in the coverage of China. Here, being adversarial is not about the media being a “watch dog” over the government, or being “the fourth estate,” with a core mission of “keeping the bastards honest,” as the saying goes in Australian politics. Instead, it refers to a kind of reporting that takes as given that China is a hostile nation, and that this perception “legitimizes ways of reporting on China that are adversarial in a pre-determined way”. This adversarial perspective not only dictates what kinds of stories readers should hear and read about China, but it also dictates how these stories are told. Accordingly, the ritual of objective reporting, which requires an attempt at balance and the provision of evidence supporting your claims, is no longer necessary.

Adversarial journalism in Australia’s mainstream English-language media is not just about stories that are critical of China. Rather, it involves the adoption of a pre-determined news-making agenda that privileges a particular point of view—in this case, that of the security and intelligence establishment—at the expense of other perspectives, and the consequently narrow framework for selecting what to cover and how to cover it. This approach to reporting on China had become the norm for several years before COVID-19, and any analysis of how the Australian media reported China’s experience with COVID-19 must keep this backdrop firmly in mind.

COVID-19: from Wuhan to Australia

On 23 January 2020, with the announcement of a lockdown in Wuhan in China’s Hubei province, Sydney airport began screening passengers arriving from that city. The travel advisory for Australians wanting to visit Hubei was subsequently raised to level 4: “Do not travel.” Australia’s first case of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) was confirmed on 25 January—a man from Wuhan traveling on flight CZ321 from Guangzhou to Melbourne a week earlier. On the same day, three other people tested positive in Sydney after also returning from Wuhan. As more school students and their parents returned from China after Australia’s long summer holiday (which coincided with China’s Spring Festival), Chinese-Australian parents took to WeChat with two online petitions asking the

Australian Government to quarantine students who had visited China during the school holidays (Kozaki & Nguyen, 2020). Meanwhile, as many Australian citizens of Chinese origin were still stranded in Wuhan, the Australian government announced on 29 January that it would send planes to Wuhan to bring them back, but would quarantine them for 14 days on Christmas Island, a remote Australian island well-known for its now-closed immigration detention center. In response to increasingly many cases of infection in Australia, the government shut its borders to China on 1 February.

Against this backdrop, what are the dominant narrative frameworks within which China's COVID-19 crisis was reported? What geopolitical, ideological, economic, and cultural forces shape and account for these narrative frameworks? What does Australian media's reporting of China's experience with COVID-19 tell us about the role of media in shaping the geopolitical landscape featuring China's rise, on one hand, and the growing hostility between China and the United States, on the other hand? Focusing on these questions, this article is a critical analysis of the major news stories, documentaries, opinions, and analyses published in Australia's most influential media outlets between 1 January and 31 March 2020, with a view to identifying the key themes, perspectives, and angles in these reports. The material chosen for analysis falls into one of several categories: (1) key media programs that are widely considered to be authoritative and trustworthy, (2) media stories written by journalists who enjoy the highest level of professional recognition in the field of journalism, (3) media narratives that elicit the strongest responses from China, the Chinese-Australian community, and English-speaking public in Australia. The article is less concerned with presenting a quantitative content analysis in order to show bias in the framing of these stories—that is taken as given (Evans, 2020; Hu, 2020; Jiang, 2019). Instead, I am more interested in exploring the likely role that opinion leaders, high-impact media programs, news stories, and journalistic practices play in shaping public opinion of China and its handling of COVID-19. Before discussing how different media sectors in Australia responded to the outbreak of the pandemic in China, it is useful to offer an overview of the structure and landscape of Australia's media, and of how changing geopolitical dynamics have shaped Australian media discourses of China in the few years before COVID-19.

Australia media—structure and landscape

Like the United Kingdom, Australia has a bifurcated media landscape, featuring both a strong public broadcasting sector and a competitive commercial sector. The public sector consists of the hybrid-funded multicultural broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC, radio, television, and online). Similar to the BBC in institutional structure and organizational ethos, the ABC is widely considered to be the most authoritative and trustworthy media and news organization in Australia, as repeatedly found in national surveys by market research company Roy Morgan (Knox, 2019), including during the Coronavirus pandemic (Roy Morgan, 2020). The ABC's flagship programs include influential programs such as the weekly *Four Corners*, described by the ABC itself as "Australia's premier investigative journalism program" (ABC Iview, 2019). Similarly, *Q+A*, a high-profile panel discussion program that airs on Mondays right after *Four Corners*, features politicians and opinion leaders, and is dedicated to discussing important issues of the day. Both programs play an important role in shaping the national discussion, and even the formulation of government policies.

The commercial sector is much more complex, but in recent years, its diversity has been greatly diminished by a number of take-overs and mergers. For instance, the removal of the "two-out-of-three" media ownership rule in 2017 (Dwyer, 2016) led to the take-over of Fairfax Media, a major

independent print media company, by Nine Entertainment (Muller, 2018)—“a company known more for its tabloid style than independent journalism” (Dwyer & Koskie, 2019). As a result, well-known Fairfax mastheads such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), *The Age* in Melbourne, and *The Australian Financial Review* have become part of the Nine Entertainment empire. Meanwhile, media outlets in Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp still dominate the Australian market, with print titles including the broadsheet *The Australian*, tabloids such as *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald Sun*, a wide range of magazines, pay TV channels, and local/regional newspapers, and Sky News Australia, known for its right-wing personalities and editorial stance. Between them, News Corp and Nine Entertainment now control the bulk of Australia’s newspaper sector. In addition, shock-jock radio personalities such as Ray Hadley and the recently retired Alan Jones on Sydney’s 2GB have been highly influential, and are widely known for riding on populist sentiments and espousing a generally right-wing political agenda (Fowler, 2018). They sit at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from the ABC, which right-wing politicians and conservative members of the public believe is dominated by “lefties,” and their radio programs are often a favorite place for politicians to make their voices heard. As Randal MacDonald (2019), founder of the Australian Press Council and former CEO and editor-in-chief of the then-Fairfax paper *The Age*, laments, “the Australian Coalition Government and the Rupert Murdoch empire, the ‘shocking’ jocks and the Right-wing ideologists are limiting any chance of informed public debate in this country.”

The Australian media’s adoption of adversarial journalism in covering China is not limited to the right-wing media, and is certainly not monopolized by the tabloids. Over the past few years, the China influence narrative, which manifests in a multitude of political, social, and cultural issues, has grown to dominate the Australian news media’s coverage of China. The best example is perhaps “Power and Influence,” a *Four Corners* investigation into political donations by Chinese nationals and Chinese Australians, which aired in June 2017 (ABC Television, 2017). The program provided a timely and much-needed exposé of an area that is ripe for reform, and not just in relation to donations from foreign nationals. However, it was also widely criticized for its framing of these issues, as well as for journalistic practices that has been called “insinuating journalism” (Sun & Yu, 2019)—a style of reporting on China’s influence that operates on guilt by association, suggesting “links” and “connections”—however tenuous—rather than producing actual evidence of Chinese influence (Laurenceson, 2019).

Despite being mired in defamation suits and receiving criticism from several quarters, the 2017 episode of *Four Corners* has significantly shaped the ways in which China has been reported in subsequent years. As a joint production of the taxpayer-funded ABC and the commercial operator Fairfax, “Power and Influence” also embodies another serious problem that has plagued the ABC’s news and current affairs coverage of the Chinese influence debate and Australia-China relations in general: after many decades as the nation’s leader in journalistic standards, the public broadcaster seems to have allowed itself to be influenced by the news values and news-making practices of commercial outlets (Sun, 2019b).

ABC, COVID-19, and China

True to its uncontestable reputation as the most trustworthy media outlet in Australia, the ABC has played a crucial role in keeping the country informed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ABC’s resident journalist, health reporter, and physician Dr Norman Swan’s “Coronacast,” a podcast that answers various questions about the virus, is currently among Australia’s most listened-to and downloaded podcasts. In the words of an *SMH* journalist, “From the start of the COVID-19

pandemic, two voices [Norman Swan and Tegan Taylor] have helped calm the nerves of Australians, while keeping us informed on the outbreak, with practical, actionable ways we can all help flatten the curve” (Wells, 2020).

Parallel to this, the ABC’s news and current affairs coverage of COVID-19 in China has mostly been framed as a political story, and once again we turn to *Four Corners* to identify the key narrative ingredients in this framing. On Monday, 24 February 2020, a month after the Wuhan lockdown, *Four Corners* aired the first of several episodes about COVID-19. At this point, 15 cases had been reported in Australia, and the Australian government had shut the borders to travelers from China. This episode, simply titled “Coronavirus,” focused on China, whereas subsequent episodes turned their attention to the United States, and to Australia’s domestic efforts at containing the virus. A careful analysis of the narrative framework in this first episode is instructive. Presented by ABC reporter, Sean Nicholls, the investigation featured numerous individuals, including an Australian think-tank commentator (Richard McGregor), an epidemiologist (Raina MacIntyre), a former ABC (and now BBC) China correspondent (Stephen McDonnell), a China-based political commentator (Wu Qiang) who fell out of favor for his criticisms of how the Chinese government handled the crisis, and a Chinese-Australian migrant from Wuhan, a Chinese health official, a local resident in Wuhan, a few medical workers in Wuhan hospitals, and an Australian expat living in Wuhan (Tim McLean).

The *Four Corners* program juggles a few narrative frames. It first presents the perspective of health experts sharing their views on how the novel virus developed, what its connections and differences were with earlier pandemics, and what were the likely scenarios brought about by the outbreak in China. Tinged with anxiety and concern, the tone of the experts is tentative and exploratory, offering their authoritative views on these questions, but also stressing the novel nature of the virus and the uncertainties this raises. Another angle is the inadequate handling of the virus by the Chinese government. Giving voice to both angry Wuhan residents and Australian expats, the program projected an image of hospitals failing to cope, medical staff becoming desperate, and, more prominently, the heavy-handedness of local authorities, with the implication of infringements of individuals’ human rights. Tim McLean says to the camera,

The police are actually knocking on doors . . . , they’re dragging them out, mate. . . . It’s quite terrifying knowing that people can knock on your door and drag you out for no reason at all, because you’ve got a temperature. (ABC Television, 2020a)

Apart from projecting the impression of draconian and authoritarian measures, the program also repeatedly returns to the question of Wuhan local government’s tardy response to the initial outbreak. Speaking about the serious ramifications of this delay, Richard McGregor, from the Australian think-tank the Lowy Institute, believes that ‘local officials in Wuhan did withhold information’:

They lost about two weeks, maybe three weeks, just when the virus was at it’s [sic] sort of nascent point, just at a time where they could have traced it, just at a time where perhaps they could have checked it more substantially. But that was lost because it got caught up in the politics of the information flow and information surveillance in China. (ABC Television, 2020a)

McGregor also goes further, spelling out the threat the pandemic poses to Xi Jinping’s political regime, and arguing that unless Xi can get control of the narrative, the pandemic could “damage

his image . . . even with ordinary Chinese people.” Related to this constant refrain linking the outbreak of COVID-19 to political control is the fate of whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang, within the narrative framework of censorship. Political commentator Wu Qiang says,

The public intellectuals and the public both realised that Dr Li represents the conscience of China. He was suppressed from the beginning from telling the truth. He could have saved . . . thousands of people’s lives. But all this was concealed due to the authority’s suppression of free speech. (ABC Television, 2020a)

The issue related to Dr Li is also interpreted as a symptom of censorship by the Communist Party of China (CPC), and Xi Jinping’s desire for tight political control. As Stephen McDonnell says,

Doctor Li was disciplined by his own hospital. He was even picked up by the police and taken in, and castigated and told not to spread rumours. This is what happens when you are saying things publicly that the Communist Party doesn’t like. (ABC Television, 2020a)

The claims of censorship, the criticisms of local authorities’ failure to inform the public, and the denunciation of the severe measures taken by the police and Wuhan’s local government followed a well-established narrative framework of reporting on China. China’s coercive measures aimed at controlling people’s movements, portrayed in terms of heavy-handed policing and infringements of individuals’ civil liberties and human rights, were all reported in light of China’s political system—the implication being that such practices would not happen in a liberal democracy. In reality, however, many similar coercive strategies—police enforcement of social distancing, mandatory quarantine, hefty fines for refusal to conform to new rules and curfews—were all adopted in Australia’s state of Victoria in July and August, in response to a second wave of the pandemic, and were rationalized as extraordinary but necessary measures. Thus, there seems to be an implicit assumption that there is “bad authoritarianism,” which is readily practiced by undemocratic states such as China, and there is “necessary authoritarianism,” which is reluctantly adopted by liberal democracies in order to contain and suppress the virus for the greater good of the community and society. While Australia’s media seems to assume the difference between these two kinds of authoritarianism in order to justify the equally heavy-handed, approach adopted in Australia, there has been little attempt to discursively disaggregate the authoritarian measures China invoked to combat COVID-19, and the authoritarian practices China is routinely criticized for in the Australian media.

It could be argued that China’s political authoritarianism is linked to, and in some ways, caused the outbreak of the pandemic. This view seems to be implicit in criticisms of the Hubei government’s failure to inform Beijing promptly, and its attempts to suppress individuals wanting to blow the whistle. This, however, does not acknowledge that governments in both China and Australia operate according to the logic of both bureaucratic checks and balances and administrative self-preservation and self-interest. The mistakes made by Hubei’s government—its lack of transparency and reluctance to inform the public and the central government—were mostly framed as manifestations of China’s authoritarianism. In contrast, even though similar mistakes were made in Australia in its own handling of the virus—think of the Ruby Princess debacle, whereby the NSW authorities allowed a cruise ship to dock in Sydney despite the fact the ship was carrying 663 infected passengers, Victoria’s hotel quarantine breach, (Bashan, 2020; Visontay, 2020), and the government’s reluctance to disclose certain information to the public (Grattan, 2020)—have typically been reported as bureaucratic bungles or administrative mishandlings.

The privileging of this political framework is further evidenced in the ABC's *Q+A*, hosted by Hamish Macdonald. The episode that went to air live right after the *Four Corners* program discussed earlier also featured China and COVID-19 and focused on the Australia-China relationship. The panel comprised Wang Xining, deputy head of China's Embassy in Australia, Vicky Xu, an outspoken critic of China and researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Raina MacIntyre, an infectious disease expert who also appeared in the *Four Corners* program, Jason Yat-Sen Li, China business expert and chair of the Australia-China Forum, and journalist Stan Grant, who had covered the SARS outbreak in China. The discussion aimed to cover a wide range of issues, as evidenced in the preamble to the show:

Tonight—are we too reliant on China? It's our biggest customer, a global superpower, but coronavirus leaves China isolated, and the impact on Australia is huge. Our economy is hurting, our diplomatic ties are under strain, and many of you are sharing personal stories about a rise in anti-Asian attitudes. You've got the questions, now let's get you some answers. Welcome to *Q+A*. (ABC Television, 2020b)

Although the agenda for discussion seemed wide-ranging, the discussion soon got bogged down in a lengthy stoush between Wang Xining and Vicky Xu over issues such as the Chinese government's initial suppression of information, especially in relation to Li Wenliang, its failure to act quickly enough, and its heavy-handed response to COVID-19 when it did take action. But the discussion also veered off topic and shifted to China's treatment of the Uighurs. This stoush, which mostly took the form of Wang doing his best to defend China's position and criticizing the West for its biased reporting on China, pitted against Xu's feisty interrogation of him, was clearly the highlight of the episode, attracting much social media comment and subsequent mainstream media coverage. That this conflict was intentionally built into the program is not only clear in the choice of these two panelists, who embody predictable binary positions, but also in the choice of "viewers" who were scheduled to ask questions. For instance, to keep the momentum on the debate on the Uighurs, *Q+A* had scheduled a question from an Adelaide-based Uighur Australian whose wife and son were under house arrest in Xinjiang, and whose friend's wife was detained in a Chinese prison.

The conflation of political authoritarianism with ~~what I shall call "public health authoritarianism"~~ is one key feature of the ABC's reporting of China and COVID-19. Another way in which China's political control is indelibly scripted into the Australian media's reporting is the juxtaposition of a well-established "political control" narrative with reporting on China's efforts to control COVID-19. A story that exemplifies this juxtaposition is ABC correspondent Bill Birtles' reporting on Xi Jinping's visit to Wuhan on 11 March 2020, when Wuhan was emerging from several weeks' hard lockdown. ABC Radio's (2020) *AM* host, Linda Mottram, introduced the story saying that the number of infections in China was falling rapidly, but adding "according to official figures at least." Rather than reporting this as a straightforward story of the national leader's symbolic tour to mark Wuhan's well-earned victory, Birtles started by contrasting the positive messages appearing in the "state media" and on "government television" with a "very different story" online, referring to photos taken by Wuhan residents showing police occupying residential balconies, making sure that residents did not "yell at" the President. Birtles reported that Xi's tour "went smoothly" due to "tight security," and commented on China's success, but qualified this by mentioning China's earlier attempt to cover up the scale of infection. This is an example of a few stock narratives—media propaganda, lack of transparency on the part of the government, violations of

citizens' rights, expression of dissent online—all rolled into one and grafted onto the framing of a “success story.”

During the 20 days after the airing of these episodes of *Four Corners* and *Q+A*, up to 14 March, China witnessed dramatic improvements in its efforts to contain the virus. But China's success raised an uncomfortable question for journalist Stan Grant, who had been a panelist on the *Four Corners* program. In an online article for ABC News, musing about what he called a “dangerous idea,” Grant asks, “What if it turns out that an authoritarian regime is better-equipped to handle the coronavirus emergency than liberal democracies?” (Grant 2020) and “What if the Chinese Communist Party teaches us all a lesson?” This question also seems to underlie Bill Birtles' reporting. As China's situation improved and Australia's situation deteriorated, Birtles (2020) asked whether Australia can “learn from Xi Jinping's tactics.” On one hand, Birtles' analysis is couched within the standard “China is to blame” framework: “Given the cover-ups, wrong information and underreported figures in the initial weeks—which helped turn a local outbreak in Wuhan into a global pandemic—skepticism of the Government's infection rates is fair.” On the other hand, having witnessed firsthand the efforts at containing the virus, the journalist admits, “But on the ground, the broad and restrictive nature of the outbreak measures make it easier to understand how authorities have managed to curtail the viral spread—at least for now” (Birtles, 2020a). Birtles narrated the daily toll of isolation and the cost of restrictive measures on people's lives, and also asked some Australia-based experts to comment on the suitability of applying similarly stringent measures in Australia. He quoted a University of New South Wales professor of epidemiology as saying “It's hard for individuals to have the greater good in their minds, so I completely understand why China chose that approach.” Like Raina McIntyre, who appeared in *Four Corners* and *Q+A*, this epidemiologist recognized that judgment of a country's success or failure should be based on public health, not on ideology.

Commercial media: masks of Chinese influence

The COVID-19 outbreak started in China in late January, but had spread to many other countries by early March. Throughout the entire period of the pandemic, the Chinese diaspora, scattered across various places in the world, have been on high alert. They initially watched with growing concern about how the pandemic was affecting their families and friends in China. But as China gained control over the virus, many became anxious about how the governments of their current places of residence were dealing with the crisis, having heard about what China had to do to bring it under control. Starting in mid-March 2020, the following Chinese-language meme found its way onto WeChat: “The battle against COVID-19: China played the first half, the world played the second half, and overseas Chinese were on the field throughout.” The meme very quickly became popular among migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC), since it accurately and vividly captured their anxiety about COVID-19. An analysis of how the Australian media covered COVID-19 is, therefore, not complete without considering the responses and actions of Chinese migrant communities, as well as how the mainstream English-language media framed these responses and actions.

Just as the Australian broadcast media's dual structure features public and commercial sectors, the Australian press has also historically featured a dualism between Fairfax (often considered to be on the left), and News Corp (seen as on the right). But as far as reporting on China is concerned, Fairfax/Nine and News Corp have become, in the view of Gareth Evans (2020), “indistinguishable.”

SMH, otherwise considered left-leaning, in fact, has an explicit agenda of reporting on Chinese influence, as evidenced in the paper's *own* advertisement: "If Beijing's ambition affects Australia's future. You deserve to know" ("China's Growing Influence," 2019). In exposing Beijing's ambitions, *SMH* (2019) promises to "shine a light on hidden influences," using "hard news to expose soft power." In order to achieve this, its slogan was "we do whatever it takes to break the stories," but curiously, this now seems to have been removed from their promotional material.

SMH's most controversial story about China and COVID-19 was written by Kate McClymont, who, unlike Peter Hartcher who was critical of China's handling of the Covid 19 (Hartcher 2020a and 2020b), usually does not write on China. Winner of many journalistic awards and widely respected for her fearless investigative journalism into a wide range of issues—corruption, crime, and so on—McClymont suddenly found herself labeled as a China-basher.

Tipped off by a whistle-blower, McClymont (2020) wrote that

as the coronavirus took hold in Wuhan earlier this year, staff from the Chinese government-backed global property giant Greenland Group were instructed to put their normal work on hold and source bulk supplies of essential medical items to ship back to China.

Although the news story included nothing inflammatory and was essentially based on stating "the facts," it enraged many PRC migrants, who saw this as a perfectly legal "humanitarian effort" consisting of donations from companies and individuals in Australia (Reubenstein, 2020a). What seems to be at issue here is not so much the story's factual accuracy; rather, it is that a perfectly legal action by a Chinese company and several individuals was deemed newsworthy since it cohered with the pre-existing China influence narrative framework. The use of the term "whistle-blower" carries the connotation that this was misconduct at best, illegal at worst, even though those involved broke no laws.

This report was offensive to Australia's Chinese communities, first, because shipping medical supplies from Australia to China when—as the journalist herself acknowledges—the Australian government and health authorities were not anticipating a serious pandemic in Australia, was intended as a humanitarian gesture: "At this time [January-February] China was battling the COVID-19 epidemic. As of February 14 Australia had only 15 known cases" (McClymont, 2020). But by publishing the story on 26 March, when Australia had 2300 cases and was now acutely in need of masks and other medical supplies, the story acquired a far more sinister implication. Second, most readers could be forgiven for concluding from McClymont's story that China was nothing short of predatory, and that the Chinese diaspora had misplaced loyalty. For the Chinese community, which prides itself on being able to love both their motherland and Australia and on being willing to help both whenever they can, to have their loyalty questioned in this way was deeply hurtful. Finally, what baffled Chinese-Australian readers was that, until this article appeared, McClymont, one of *SMH*'s most respected journalists, had refrained from joining the paper's China influence agenda. In a joint response to the story, Dr Tony Pun, National President of the Chinese Community Council of Australia (CCCA), and Dr Ka Sing Chua, the CCCA's National Senior Advisor, wrote that many Australian journalists' perceptions of the nation's Chinese communities were "racist," and that this kind of reporting can be "traumatic both mentally and physically" to these communities (Pun & Chua, 2020).

The politics of face masks has continued to play itself out as the pandemic has unfolded. As COVID-19 became a serious concern in Australia in early March, and as supplies of masks and other PPE became plentiful in China, the Chinese community in Australia wanted to do their bit, this time by importing masks and medical equipment from China. Ironically, although they acted out of a love for both homeland and adopted country in both cases, they soon realized that neither

or their “good deeds” was taken at face value by mainstream English-language media. A week after McClymont’s story, *SMH*’s key contributor to the Chinese influence narrative, Nick McKenzie, wrote a “sequel,” this time about some members of the Chinese community’s efforts to source medical supplies for Australia in China, accusing them of peddling the Chinese government’s agenda:

The work of Mr Kuang has multiple aims according to sources aware of his activities and open source documents sighted by *The Age* and *Herald*, which include both humanitarian and political considerations. . . . But Mr Kuang is also operating to further Beijing’s strategic aims and reputation, including building political influence in Australia. (McKenzie, 2020)

Nick McKenzie, also an award-winning journalist, was the chief investigator for the joint ABC-Fairfax episode of *Four Corners* discussed earlier, a program which led to two defamation suits (Cornwall, 2018; Griffiths, 2018). Consistent with his usual practice of writing about Chinese influence, McKenzie (2020) cites vague sources he cannot identify, and says, “People familiar with his [Kuang’s] plans said he wanted to help Australia’s efforts to contain the virus and assist China’s soft power and political influence goals in this country through charitable activity.” While there is nothing surprising about McKenzie writing yet another story about Chinese influence, some Chinese Australians were outraged by the fact that a genuine humanitarian effort still could not escape being branded an act of Chinese influence. Whether they were sending medical supplies to China or bringing them to Australia, this community found itself embroiled in what they called “mask politics,” at a time when diplomatic relations between China and Australia seemed to be on a downward spiral, and they ended up being blamed either way. As Australia-based China Studies scholar David Brophy (2020) observes, in response to McClymont’s and McKenzie’s articles on masks politics, “Chinese Australians have been depicted as predators for exporting masks and Personal Protective Equipment to Wuhan at the height of its crisis, and as subversive influence-peddlers when they imported the same items back from China to Australia.”

But it would be wrong to assume that *SMH* monopolizes claims of the Chinese diaspora profiting from medical supplies during the pandemic. On 1 May, Seven, a free-to-air commercial Australian television network, published a story titled “Cash, Coronavirus and Baby Formula: The Truth about Wuhan’s Mercy Flight to Australia” (Burke, 2020).¹ The report suggested that Richard Yuan, chair of the Australia China Entrepreneurs Club, attempted to sell a shipment of medical supplies to Australian government agencies in the early stages of the pandemic. On 24 June, Seven issued an apology to Mr Yuan on its official website, saying that

Mr Yuan has advised Seven that neither he nor his Association, namely Australia China Goodwill Association (ACGA), sought to profit (nor have they profited) from the shipment of supplies, but rather intended that they be donated to local communities. Seven accepts that this is the case and officially and openly apologises to Mr Yuan and his family. (quoted in Reubenstein, 2020b)

Fear and loathing in the tabloid media and on shock-jock radio

While the ABC framed COVID-19 in China in terms of disinformation, censorship and authoritarian control, and the respectable end of the commercial papers such as *SMH* sang from much the same song sheet but with a distinct interest in pushing its China influence discourse, Australia’s

tabloid and shock-jock media dealt in racism-tinged sensationalism, pure and simple. This strategy, clearly aimed at attracting viewers and growing subscriptions, nevertheless adopted a few tropes. The first is that of conspiracy theory. This was illustrated when Paul Murray interviewed some right-wing commentators and Liberal backbenchers on Murdoch's Sky News. One commentator approvingly cited the Falun Gong-backed paper *Epoch Times*, which had alleged that COVID-19 was "concocted by the Chinese Communist Party," and endorsed wild conspiracy theories about COVID-19 being a deliberate Chinese Communist Party plot ("Australia to 'Reap the Rewards of Surrendering to China for the Past Decade'," 2020). Bronwyn Bishop (quoted in Media Watch, 2020), a former member of the Australian Parliament for 30 years, also confidently claimed on Sky that the virus was a Chinese biological weapon. This conspiracy theory was further promoted by Alan Jones on 16 March on his Sydney-based talk-back radio program, and a similar theory, suggesting that China deliberately unleashed the virus to attack the West, was also given oxygen on 5 March on 2GB by radio and Sky News host Chris Smith.

The second trope involves racist jokes and headlines at the expense of Chinese people. Tabloid papers got creative with clever or provocative anti-Chinese headlines: "China Kids Stay Home" (Armstrong & Hildebrandt, 2020, p. 1), for a story about children who had just returned to Australia from China; and "Chinese Virus Panda-monium," with "panda" highlighted in a different color (Argoon & McArthur, 2020: 1). Reports such as these incurred widespread wrath among members of the Chinese community. Two days after these headlines appeared, a petition started on change.org, calling for the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* to apologize over their "downright offensive and unacceptable" headlines (Wong, 2020); to date (August 2020), it has gathered 93,500 signatures.

The third trope takes the form of a war of words between Chinese government officials and tabloid writers over the Australian media's coverage of China. On 1 April, Sydney's Chinese Consulate-General (2020a) took issue with *The Daily Telegraph* for a series of articles that were "full of ignorance, prejudice and arrogance" about China's response to COVID-19. The *Telegraph* hit back with more articles, including a point-by-point response to the statement (Blair, 2020b). The stories adopted a combative tone, aiming to insult rather than engage. In response to the Consulate-General's statement that the Communist Party of China adopted a "people-centred philosophy" in its handling of the pandemic virus, Blair (2020b) replied, "Please tell us more about your 'people-centred philosophy' and how many bullets it requires." The Consulate-General (2020b) then criticized a story from 22 April featuring images that "insult China" and including a "defaced design of China's national emblem maliciously linking COVID-19 with China," and demanded a public apology from the *Telegraph*. But the paper doubled down on its attack, continuing to publish strongly anti-China pieces (e.g. Blair, 2020a).

Conclusion

While a country's success or failure in containing the virus is significantly determined by the political will of its government and its style of governance, this analysis suggests that how the media of a given country report on China's handling of COVID-19 is shaped by myriad factors, including that country's relationship with China, its position in the global geopolitical order, the dominant ways in which its media narratives depicted China prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, and, of course, the degree of pluralism in that country's mainstream journalism. Thus, how various segments of the Australian media have reported on China's COVID-19 experience says more about their own fears and anxieties and their political, ideological, and cultural positions than about the

reality of how the Chinese people experienced COVID-19. This analysis makes it clear that, while Australia's media may give the impression that there is only one story to tell about China and COVID-19 and there is only one way of telling that story, in reality the frames, perspectives, and discursive positions they adopt are cultural rather than natural, ideologically influenced and profit-driven rather than objective, balanced, or fair. The virus may know no boundaries, but virus-related reporting is profoundly bound up with politics, history, and the cultural identity of a nation.

Despite the differences between various media sectors in Australia, this analysis allows us to make a few observations. First, in their reporting on China, there is a convergence not only between the public and commercial media sectors, but also between liberal and conservative media. Across the board, there is a high level of unfavorable reporting about China in relation to COVID-19, and favorable reporting has either been played down or left out. The WHO's praise of China's efforts, which was published in Chinese state media, was not widely reported in Australia; in fact, the only reporting argued that the WHO was not tough enough with China (e.g. Rauhala, 2020). Some Western journalists (e.g. Johnson, 2020) argued that China had acted quickly despite an initial delay, thereby buying the rest of the world time. These opinions were extensively circulated on some social media platforms, but did not gain traction in Australia's mainstream media. Despite China's success in controlling the pandemic, as evidenced in the rapidly decreasing numbers of infections and deaths, the Australian media made light of this achievement and continued to look to elsewhere—at times to South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan—for lessons. Reporting on China's success in managing COVID-19 would have been ideologically unappealing.

Second, while the overall tone of reporting on China and COVID-19 is unfavorable, there is a division of labor between discursive sectors of the media. As discussed earlier, the ABC has continued its long-standing liberalist framework of criticizing China's information censorship and government control, either by conflating political authoritarianism with the authoritarian measures necessary to contain the virus, or by fusing the political control narrative with China's efforts to control COVID-19. While a narrative focus on China's censorship, propaganda, and draconian public health measures are compatible with the ABC's existing framework for reporting on China, the respectable end of the commercial press, such as *SMH*, also continued its China influence narrative in its framing of the Chinese Australians' two-way humanitarian efforts, thereby applying its erstwhile advertising promise of doing "whatever it takes" to its pursuit of this narrative.

Meanwhile, the tabloid press and shock-jock radio have continued to serve up a potent cocktail of fear about the "yellow peril," anxiety about "reds under the bed," and an orientalist perception of the Chinese as an alien and repugnant people who eat bats. As one Australia-based commentator observed,

Many people attributed the devastating situation in Wuhan to the existence of communism in China, as if the virus were partial to a set of political ideals, asserting that the Chinese people have "backwards" hygiene practices and a "poor" healthcare system. (Qian, 2020)

This analysis focuses on narrative frames, and only studies the impact on audiences in indirect ways—such as readers' responses in petitions, protests, and forum comments. In late-June 2020, 6 months after the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, Australia's think-tank the Lowy Institute published its annual poll of public sentiment on global issues. The poll shows that only 23% of adult Australians now trust China "a great deal" or "somewhat" to act responsibly in the world, compared with 52% in 2018 (Kassam, 2020, p. 6). Although there is no direct proof linking the media's coverage of China to Australia's public sentiment—during the pandemic or otherwise—it is fairly safe to speculate that such a connection does exist. After all, Australians mostly find out

what China did and did not do from their favorite media outlets and their preferred social media opinion leaders.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council (grant number DP180100663).

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Note

1. Burke's story (<https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/cash-coronavirus-and-baby-formula-the-truth-about-wuhans-mercy-flight-to-australia>) and Seven's apology to Mr Yuan (<https://7news.com.au/features/apology-to-mr-richard-yuan-c-11222670>) has now been deleted from Seven's website. The *Knowledge* source provides an excerpt from the report, and Reubenstein (2020b) quotes from the apology.

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