| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Framing and the Media Field: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Stories on the Internet Giant Alibaba in China

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| **ABSTRACT**

Anti-monopoly has been one of China's most crucial policy shifts in recent years, exerting a major influence on internet giants. The anti-monopoly investigation into Alibaba in 2020 is an example. The purpose of this study is to uncover the frames used in news stories about the event and to identify the factors influencing the news production. Critical discourse analysis is conducted by analyzing news stories extracted from two influential media in China, *People's Daily* and *Caixin*, from a perspective that considers both texts and social contexts. The findings reveal that news stories from *People's Daily* and *Caixin* are considerably different in genre, register, and discourse, thus developing different interpretations, i.e., frames, of the same event. The study determines three agents involved in news production and employs the media field as a framework to examine their relations and interactions: the state's official discourse is internalized by media, while media use symbolic power to construct the audience's perception of persons or things in reality. Moreover, by classifying the top 30 comments on two media's posts on Weibo (a twitter-like social media), the study demonstrates that audiences actively reinterpret and reconstruct the news discourse, borrowing power from the state and media to resist internet giants.

1. Introduction

On August 1, 2022, the new edition of the Anti-Monopoly Law of the People's Republic of China took effect, marking its first significant reform since it entered into force in 2008. There are now more restrictions on internet platform companies and the digital economy. Previously, China's anti-monopoly laws were primarily applicable to traditional industries and rarely enforced. It is said that 2021 is "the first year of anti-monopoly", but there was an evident sign in late 2020, when one of the country's largest internet platform companies, Alibaba, was investigated.

A majority of anti-monopoly studies in China have used the perspective of Political Economics of Communication and theories like "platform capitalism" to highlight the necessity of anti-monopoly measures. Some have also viewed the issue from the perspective of Internet Governance, considering the platform companies as one object of governance. This study expects to offer a different perspective, i.e., how news media cover stories regarding anti-monopoly and internet platform companies. Internet platform companies are identified as companies that bring together different users and provide services for users (Srnicek, 2016). They are digital infrastructures, bringing convenience to people by connecting online and offline (e.g., online shopping and car-hailing). As they expand into various industries, people feel concerned, and this is the background of the law revision. This study uses the example of Alibaba, one of the largest internet platform companies in China, to examine how influential news media in China covered the anti-monopoly investigation on Alibaba and what impact these stories had on the audience.

To explore, this study introduces framing theory and argues that there is a hidden frame in every news report, i.e., a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1994). And audiences have their own framework for understanding what they receive. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as a method, with the advantage of combining micro-level text with social context. It can not only reveal how frames and discourses are used in news stories but also how media are incorporated into a much vaster system, i.e., the "media field". The term "field" means "a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents" (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). This study aims to examine the interrelationships among three agents: the state, media, and audience in the media field, and how they interact with each other. By combining the grounded case of Alibaba with the theoretical framework of the media field, this article intends to serve as an exploratory study and provides inspiration for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework
Media have become the main source of information that enable people to learn what is going on around the world, which they cannot experience directly. However, what is reported in the media is not a reflection of reality but selective "facts", bringing distinctions between "the world outside" and "the pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922). The latter is also known as "pseudo-environment". To understand how media influence people's understanding of the world in this way, framing theory is often applied to "conceptualizing news texts into empirically operationalizable dimensions" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). When seeking to explore the mechanisms of news framing, this study finds it inevitable to investigate from a broader perspective that relates the micro-level text to macro-level social contexts. Bourdieu's field theory stands out for it suggests meso-level analysis "between the micro level of interactions and the macro level of the state or the social system" (Fligstein, 2001). With reference to framing and field theory, this study reconstructs a "media field" based on the context of the specific case in the article.

Framing is a method used by the media to "construct" reality, which manifests the larger social structure through microscopic texts. It is identified as "schemata of interpretation" that "locate, perceive, identify and label" events and occurrences (Goffman, 1974), thus enabling journalists to "process large amounts of information quickly and routinely" (Gitlin, 1980). It is assumed that every news story has a theme, i.e., a central idea describing the person or event involved, contributing to the structure and thinking mode hidden behind it. As news discourse is regarded as common sense or shared value by the majority of society, it generates impacts on the audience's cognition and plays a role in broader social contexts.

Field theory is introduced to explore the mechanism of news frame formation and construct a framework to link news production to the whole social system. The field is conceptualized by Bourdieu as a "social space that does not exist in the abstract" but "must be understood in terms of [...] the relational struggles among agents in each space" (Couldry, 2007). Agents who struggle within it hold similar assumptions about the nature of the field, like "a field is only relatively autonomous" and "depending on its richness in field-specific capital or its dependence on capital from the political or economic field" (Bourdieu, 1986, 1996).

The media field or journalism field is the field that clusters the power and capital relationships in news production. Agents in the media field have a "specific type of capital to capture [the] relative ability to influence journalistic events" (Couldry, 2003). Rather than coercion, power is defined as "a way in which certain actions modify others" (Foucault, 1983) by indirect or invisible imposition. The state has meta-capital above all other capitals and power. It seems that the state does not directly intervene in daily news production but manifests its power in ways such as the "official discourse". Official discourse is a view that "asserts what a person or a thing is" and "everyone has to recognize it at least within the boundaries of a definite society" (Bourdieu, 1989). The media will follow the official discourse and use it as a premise of their news stories. There is also power in the media, the power to make things with words, i.e., "symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1989). In this way, the state and media have the capitals and power to work together to construct a shared discourse in news coverage and influence the audience's cognition.

The media field is a useful theoretical device for illustrating the multi-agent interactions and relations in the production of news, as well as in broader social contexts. However, the field is "an open question for empirical analysis" (Willig et al., 2015). To study it, a practical investigation is an aspect more important than a theoretical definition. Therefore, the current study reconfigures Bourdieu's media field to fit the context of what is happening in the specific case of China.

The first difference is the position of economic capital in the media field. In Bourdieu's field theory, economic and cultural capitals are at the core. But in China's context, media must be dominated by state capitals if they want to gain the qualification to collect, edit and publish original news. Though some media have made attempts to commercialize by introducing private capitals, the power of private capitals has never been superior to that of the state. Therefore, the economic factor is not emphasized in the framework of this paper.

The second change is the emergence of the new agent, the audience. Bourdieu's media field theory was formulated in an era when mass media, such as television, prevailed. However, new media (or social media) have become the main channel for information

dissemination, with the ability to empower the audience. Agents in the media field "aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field" (Bourdieu, 2005). New agents may reorient the capital and power relations in the field and offer opportunities for transformation or even destabilization. Accordingly, this study believes the activity of the audience should be considered. Instead of accepting the discourse of the news indiscriminately, this work argues that audiences interpret and reconstruct the discourse based on their understanding, experience, or interest. Furthermore, it is assumed that doing so may help the audiences create capital and win them power so that they can also have a place in the media field.

Based on the above contexts, the framework of the media field in this study centers on three main agents: the state, media, and audience. Figure 1 shows the mechanism of the media field and the interactions of three agents in news production and consumption.
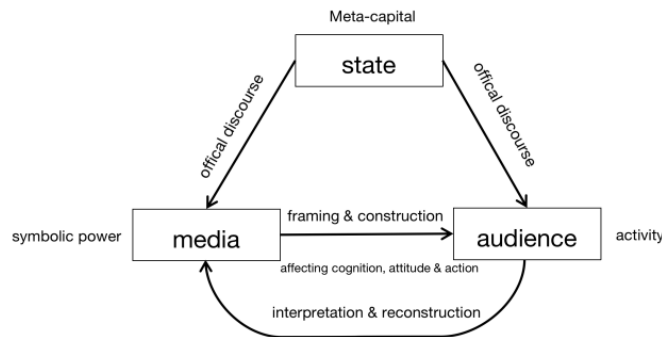

Figure 1: Relations and interactions in the media field

3. Methodology

This study adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an approach to operationalizing the analysis of news frames and discourses. The pivotal idea of CDA is to combine micro-level discourse with macro-level social context based on the assumption that "language is social practice instead of a simple linguistic phenomenon" (Fairclough, 1989). The analysis is on the basis of a three-dimensional model, including text, discursive practice, and social practice (shown in Figure 2). Text analysis focuses on words, syntax, and the organization of the whole text, with the assumption that different ways of text organization can create different meanings. Discursive practice is about how the text is produced and interpreted; social practice examines agents in a broader social context. In this way, we can "unravel the hidden meanings while scrutinizing the presence of power in media discourse studies" (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015).
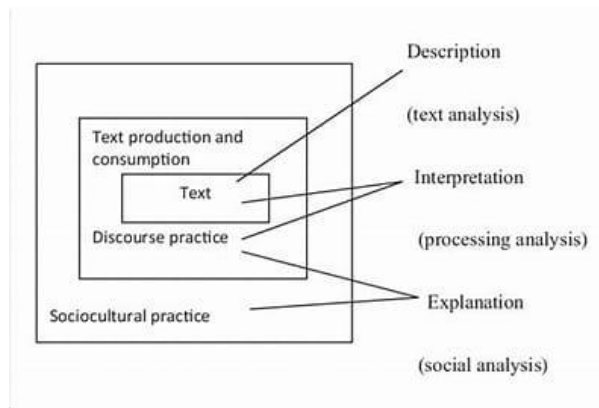

Figure 2: The three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis
Source: Fairclough (1989), p. 98.

News samples in this study were selected from two news media in China: *People's Daily and Caixin*. News related to current affairs is subject to strict regulations in the context of China's media system. All news media are associated with the state to some extent, but distinctions still exist. *People's Daily* is an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is one of the most influential voices in China, and its coverage is often recognized as the attitude of the state. *Caixin* is one of the leading media specializing in economic and financial news. It is also a state-dominant media in form because, in China, only media controlled by state-owned capital can obtain licenses for collecting, editing, and publishing original news. But *Caixin* has introduced private

capital investment and has become commercial. The two media are chosen so that we can compare and examine whether there are differences in their news frames and discourses when they cover the same event.

This study chose "anti-monopoly" and "Alibaba" as keywords and selected news reports containing these words from the two media. A majority of relevant news coverage was reported on December 24, 2020, when the anti-monopoly investigation into Alibaba began, and April 10, 2021, when the results of the investigation became public. Daily briefings containing other news and reports from *People's Daily* reprinted by *Caixin* were excluded. As a result, a total of 10 reports were collected, 4 from *People's Daily* and 6 from *Caixin*. Comments on these stories on Weibo (a twitter-like social media popular in China) were selected as the embodiment of audience discourse. According to the algorithm of Weibo, comments are generally ranked from high to low based on their number of "likes". This study selected the top 30 comments as samples for analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1 Frame: Mode of Discourse Representation
To explore, this study first analyzed 10 news stories and categorized them according to their genre, register, and discourse. Genre is the most noticeable thing people can recognize at first sight. It indicates what type of text the story belongs to and what characteristics this type of text has. Registers are ways of saying different things (Halliday, 1978) concerning the tone of the text and the subject area. Discourse refers to the texts and sentences used in the stories as well as the meaning and thinking mode they intend to express as a whole. Together the three manifest a specific way of interpreting news events and form the frame of the news story.

4.1.1 Genre
The genres of relevant news stories can be divided into three categories: news reporting, news commentary, and in-depth reporting. News reporting only states the fact of the event and usually follows the principle of "5W and 1H" (who, when, where, what, why, how) to inform the audience of what has happened. In addition to giving a brief overview of the event, the in-depth reporting provides a deeper analysis of the impact of the event. While the two genres above both show objectivity and value-freedom (at least in their presentations), news commentaries are subjective, actively expressing the attitude and views of the author.

This study found that among four stories from *People's Daily*, three are commentaries, and only one is reporting. As for *Caixin*, most stories are in the form of in-depth reporting with professional financial analysis, and only one is brief news reporting.

This shows that when covering the same event, *People's Daily*, as an official newspaper that has close relations with the governing party, tends to use commentaries to voice its attitude on the issue. In fact, what it comments is always regarded as the state's voice and sets the keynote (i.e., the official attitude of the state) for the event. This will influence other media's stories (In fact, *Caixin* and other media all had reprinted the commentaries of *People's Daily*). There is limited space left for other media, and most of them take another approach, i.e., in-depth reporting, to appear different and gain a place to survive in the media competition.

4.1.2 Register
The registers of news stories from the two media were quite distinct.

News stories in *People's Daily* were subjective; they clearly expressed criticism of monopoly, e.g., "by no means can platform companies become monopolies", "monopoly is the enemy of the market economy", etc. Moreover, all of its commentaries started from the perspective of "our nation," and words from the government work system were frequently used, e.g., "improving the socialist market economic system", "promoting high-quality development and common prosperity", and "standardizing economic order", etc. Due to its close relationship with the governing party, it can speak in a formal, assertive, or even dominant tone and express its attitude in the name of the state.

It was not common for media like *Caixin* to publish stories in the manner of *People's Daily*. As a professional financial medium, *Caixin* used laws and similar anti-monopoly cases in foreign countries to analyze the event. It also used data to present detailed economic and financial consequences of the anti-monopoly investigation into Alibaba, providing analysis and advice from experts on this aspect. Accordingly, news stories from *Caixin* are in a professional tone and are basically value-free.

4.1.3 Discourse
In this section, the article analyzed the mode of discourse of these news stories and summarized the frame of the two news media. The analysis result of the central ideas of news stories presents in the table below.

Table 1: Central idea of news stories

Number of stories	Central idea			
	Result of the investigation	Necessity for anti-monopoly supervision	Impact of Anti-monopoly investigation on Alibaba	Improvements and future trends of the anti-monopoly law
People's Daily	1	3	0	0
Caixin	1	0	3	2

As shown in the table, *People's Daily*'s news story focuses on anti-monopoly's necessity and rationality. A common theme in its discourse is: that monopolies violate laws and regulations, and anti-monopoly ensures fair competition and better development of the market economy. Except for one news reporting, the three news commentaries all emphasize the same theme directly in the title: anti-monopolies are necessary to promote the development of the market economy, particularly the digital economy. Other factors, such as social dissatisfaction with the monopoly of internet platform companies such as Alibaba, and anti-monopoly practices in other countries, are also used to help rationalize anti-monopoly supervision.

In *Caixin*'s news stories, half of them focused on the economic and financial consequences of the anti-monopoly investigation into Alibaba, especially by analyzing the fluctuations of Alibaba's stock with professional knowledge. Though *Caixin* did not emphasize the social impact of this event as *People's Daily* did, it released in-depth reports to review the anti-monopoly law practice in China after the result of the investigation was published. These reports cited the professional analysis of financial and legal experts and emphasized the symbolic and progressive significance of the investigation, which reflected *Caixin*'s social concern. Unlike *People's Daily*, *Caixin* demonstrated the event from the perspective of professionalism, with the use of law and economic knowledge. But there are similarities between the two. By using all these arguments, *Caixin* also helped rationalize the anti-monopoly supervision, but in a more objective, superficially insensible way.

In summary, *People's Daily* constructed its narrative based on news commentary and a state-centric perspective: emphasizing anti-monopoly supervision as a way to ensure fair competition and people's interests and to develop a high-quality market economy. *Caixin* used legal and economic expertise in its in-depth reports and analyzed the event in a more objective and professional way.

4.2 The Media Field: Interactions and Relations of Agents
In this section, the study used the model of the media field mentioned above to analyze the relations among the three agents and examine how their interactions form the news frame mentioned in the previous section.

4.2.1 Media: Controlling and Being Controlled
The analysis below is based on the assumption that, while media control others, they are also controlled by others.

People's Daily plays a different role from other media. Though it is not an official government department, it is a public institute that receives direct funding from the grant in aid. As a result, the governing party ensures that it always speaks for the party and the state. This means that it is not subject to profit considerations or other economic factors, and private capital cannot directly influence it. Moreover, since it is one of the most authoritative voices of the state, people need to follow what it publishes so that they can obtain the state's attitude. By assigning certain things or persons an identity, it can organize the audience's perception of them, i.e., the use of symbolic power. As in the case, when *People's Daily* criticized Alibaba by using discourse like "carrying on vicious competitions" and "lacking self-discipline and social responsibility", it set the official discourse on the issue. So other internet platform companies were aware that they could not do that, or they would be identified as "enemies" and not accepted by people. When it comes to news related to significant policy and economic changes, it is the audience and enterprises that need the information from *People's Daily*, not the other way around. *People's Daily* has access to government and party sources, so it can release authoritative information while other media can only reprint from it. Thus, it has the outstanding advantage of having a dual identity: as a representative of the state and as a medium. Due to its dual identity, it uses official discourse as a means to influence audiences and other media when providing information and also uses symbolic power to identify issues and create reality.

For *Caixin*, the situation is quite different since it does not have priority in obtaining first-hand authoritative information from the state. As with many other media, it faces a number of challenges in the contemporary media environment, including competition from self-media and the loss of audiences and advertising revenue. It must find a unique way to survive and develop its strengths. As a specialized financial and economic medium, *Caixin* has adopted a pay model for online news since 2017 (Xinhuanet, 2017) to solve the problem of income and profit. It is, therefore, critical for it to provide quality content that is worth paying for in order to retain its existing audience and attract new ones. In light of this, most of the news articles discussed above contain professional economic and financial analysis. That is because their audience, most of whom are elitists, expect to see such analysis.

4.2.2 Audience: Fighting Power with Power
In this section, the study analyzed the discourse of the audience comments and examined how they interpreted and reconstructed the discourse in news stories. Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of the top 30 comments.

Table 2: The discourse of audiences

Discourse	Concerns about over-expansion and monopoly	Concerns about the violation of consumer rights	Request to investigate and punish other internet giants
Total	13	2	15

The result indicates that internet giants' monopolies and over-expansion are among the audience's main concerns. There are, however, differences in the comments of audiences from the two media. Commentaries on the issue were characterized by an ideological and political discourse by the audience of *People's Daily*. Examples of the top-ranking comments read as:

> Alibaba is not just monopolizing the industry; it's also a media empire controlling social media and public opinions. It is invested by foreign capitals. There is a danger of foreign capitals infiltrating our politics. (435 likes, data accessed on 12 August 2022) [my translation]

> Alibaba and its management deviate from socialist values. It will be extremely frightening for the entire nation if such a large-scale enterprise is not restrained. (752 likes, data accessed on 12 August 2022) [my translation]

These ideological discourses framed Alibaba as "an enemy of society"; however, this was not the original intention of *People's Daily*, which emphasized that the state would continue to support internet platforms and their legitimate development.

The audiences of *Caixin* were more rational and viewed the event from the perspective of economy and finance, which matched with the depoliticized discourse of *Caixin*. There were some who expressed critical opinions on reports, stating that anti-monopoly was appropriate, but the relevant law needed to be improved in terms of the penalty amount and other aspects.

All of these show audiences have different interpretations of news discourse. Furthermore, they can even reconstruct the discourse to serve their own interests and gain power for themselves.

According to the results, only two comments directly expressed concerns about the internet giants' violation of personal rights, such as the misuse of personal information for advertising purposes, and 996 (the overtime work model found in many internet companies). However, audiences used another way to protect their rights. In the comments, the most frequent request was for the state to investigate and punish other internet giants, e.g., Tencent and Sina. Prior to the advent of the internet and social media, these groups of people (i.e., ordinary Chinese people) did not have access to voice their opinions. But with the advent of these technologies, it has become easier for them to express their opinions on news events. In reality, they might be unable to counteract the power of internet giants, but they could present their comments on social media, such as Weibo, and form public opinion. In this case, audiences had endured the inconvenience brought by the monopoly of internet giants for a long time (e.g., the monopoly limits people's choices and makes them pay high monopoly prices). Therefore, when the state and media began to criticize these companies, they took advantage of the opportunity to express their opinions, even if these opinions have no direct relevance to the investigation or Alibaba. In fact, they "borrowed" power from the state and media and used it to counteract the power of internet giants (Figure 3 shows some examples of these comments). Since anti-monopoly was a hot topic at the time of the event, these public opinions were easily noticed by the state and could be taken into consideration, giving the state a justification for anti-monopoly supervision.

The audience strategically utilized the rhetoric and discourse of the state and media to gain power for themselves. It seemed like they also had symbolic power (i.e., the power to make things with words). However, symbolic power "depends on the degree to which the vision proposed is founded in reality". After all, it is "a power of revelation, the power to reveal things that are already there" (Bourdieu, 1989). In some ways, the audience's comments reflected reality, so these comments could be taken into consideration, and the audience could gain power by fighting power with power. Additionally, when using borrowed discourses from the state and the media, the audience may internalize the meanings embedded within them, thus losing its autonomy as an independent agent.
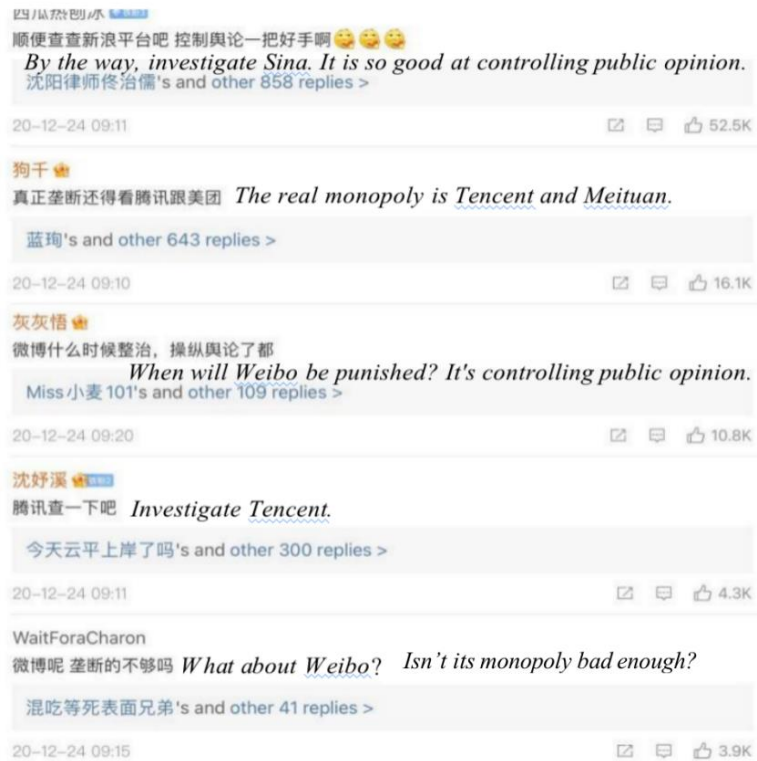
Figure 3: Audience demanding investigation on other internet giants
Source: Comments under People's Daily's official post published on 24th December 2020, accessed 12 August 2022.

5. Conclusion

This study expected to examine how news media covered news related to anti-monopoly and what factors had influenced their news production. It was assumed that every news story contained a frame and that the media used frames to interpret events. Media employed their symbolic power (i.e., the power to make things with words) to influence the cognition of their audience. However, it was deemed that other factors in the social context would also impose their power on the media. Thus, this study adopted critical discourse analysis, an approach with which we can explore the factors affecting news discourse based on a three-dimension model (i.e., text, discursive practice, and social practice) and view news production from a perspective that combines texts and social contexts.

The pivotal of the study is the framework of the media field. It is composed of three agents, the state, media, and audience, as well as their relations with each other. This framework was used to analyze the case of Alibaba, an internet giant in China that was under an anti-monopoly investigation. The study has chosen two influential media in China to examine their news stories on that event: one is *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of China's governing party; the other is *Caixin*, a specialized economic and financial medium. It was found that the discourses of the two media were very different. *People's Daily*, a representative of the state, posted news commentaries to emphasize the necessity of anti-monopoly supervision to develop a high-quality market economy. *Caixin*, however, wrote in-depth reporting to analyze the event from an economic and legal perspective.

Based on the study's analysis of the differences, it was concluded that *People's Daily* possessed the advantage of expressing authoritative official discourse. Its special relationship with the state was the most significant factor affecting its coverage. *Caixin* adopted a payment model, so it tended to offer professional stories to attract its audience and develop unique strengths. Furthermore, the study found that audiences borrowed power from the state and media to counter the power of internet giants.

To conclude, this study has identified the frame and discourse of the two media in the case and determined the mechanism of news production by analyzing the relations and interactions among three agents in the media field. Nevertheless, this study must be viewed within the context of some limitations. First, the scope of this study does not cover media other than *People's Daily* and *Caixin*. Second, only comments from Weibo are selected as representatives of the discourse of audiences. Hence, future studies should examine more types of media coverage and take into account the diversity of discourses among audiences on different

platforms. In this way, the framework of the media field and the power relations and interactions within it in this paper will be refined.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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