

# A Study on the Objectivity of China-related reports of *the New York Times*

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**Abstract:** *This paper includes the definition, history, and practice of the journalistic objectivity in the US. Taking COVID-19 reporting as examples, this paper explores the reasons why The New York Times has failed to be absolute objective in China-related reports. Based on the above research, it discusses significance of the role which the public plays in creating professional environment of journalism.*

**Keywords:** *The New York Times, China-related report, journalistic objectivity*

## 1. Introduction

Journalistic objectivity is a concept which formally put forward by the US press in 1920s and is based on decades of objective reporting practice. It is a method or style of presenting information. Writing in *Discovering the News*, Michael Schudson explains:

The belief in objectivity is just this: the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual's personal preference. Values, in this view, are an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate claim on other people. The belief on objectivity is a faith in 'facts', a distrust of 'values', and a commitment to their segregation."(Schudson, 1978, pp.5-6)

From the perspective of practice, journalistic objectivity is possible. It requires journalists to respect the facts, do balanced reporting and set aside personal preferences. To be objective, journalists should be loyal to the facts without being influenced by self-values, which means journalists need to stand with the side supported by more facts.

As a representative of the most credible and authoritative media in the US, *The New York Times* has a great influence among the US and the whole world. The public might regard their news reporting as the authority. Therefore, whether it can report the facts objectively is important. During the epidemic, *The New York Times* has provided many pieces of news related to COVID-19, and we can learn from them that they are not all objective from the perspectives of language, politics, facts, etc. Thus, *The New York Times* has failed to be absolutely objective in China-related reports.

## 2. A Certain Amount of Objective Reports

Regardless of races, religions, and nations, COVID-19 has posed challenges to all countries in the world. Being influenced by the outbreak, China was the first country to face the challenges. In the earlier period of the outbreak of the COVID-19 in China, the reports from *The New York Times* mainly covered several topics, for example, the virus appeared in Wuhan could cause a kind of pneumonia, the resource of the virus, reasons and time of the "lockdown" in Wuhan, measures taken by Chinese people, and the influences on Chinese economy and livelihood, etc.

These objective reports describe a picture of China under the serious pandemic and tell the audience how China responded to such a large-scale unexpected public health event. As a developing country which plays a important role in the world, the situation of China's society, economy and other aspects do attract attention from other countries and the US is one of them. Through these reports, the US people could learn more about China and the COVID-19 virus.

In addition, these objective reports give the US people a golden opportunity to get a comprehensive and accurate understanding of COVID-19. Some of them might have connection with China, such as business cooperation, a trip to China, etc. They needed to take measures to minimize the loss or change their plans. Reports of *The New York Times* could lead them to make more proper decisions.

To sum up, objective reports provide the audience with more facts about COVID-19. And this way of reporting indeed matches the principle of objectivity.

### **3. Being Not Objective From the Perspective of Politics**

The pandemic is a worldwide unexpected public health event which has caused huge negative influences on countries all over the world. And the pandemic in the US has been not optimistic for several months. As we all know, there is a complicated relationship between the US and China. So it is not difficult to understand that the US pay highly attention to issues related to COVID-19. As we can see in reports related to COVID-19, journalists of *The New York Times* often use the word of “Communist China” and “Communist State” instead of “China” or “the leadership of China”. “Communist China” is a word with strong political implication, which might strengthen the audience’s political prejudices. It is not helpful to form a peaceful cognition about the real China. Then I would like to analyze two pieces of news as examples.

“Coronavirus Crisis offers Taiwan a Chance to Push Back Against China” published on April 22, 2020 by Chris Horton is not objective, which means the journalist failed to understand the relationship between the mainland of China and Taiwan. The Taiwan issue has been sensitive for a long time, and the relationship between the mainland and Taiwan attracts attention from all over the world. In this context, foreign journalists should be prudent in reporting this kind of topic, especially in chasing more facts and choosing proper words. In order to avoid triggering hostility among people in the mainland and Taiwan and giving the US people a right impression on the relationship between the mainland and Taiwan, journalists even can choose to not report issues of this topic or report it in a prudent way. However, the audience can only see the antagonism and a willing of independence of the leadership of Taiwan in this piece of news. Mr. Horton portrays the mainland as an image of putting heavy pressure on Taiwan. And part of the content does not follow one-China principle. Under such circumstance, the audience would have a negative and wrong impression on the China’s government and the correct understanding of China’s politics.

The other piece of news—— “China Created a Fail-Safe System to track Contagions. It Failed.” published on March 3, 2020 by Steven Lee Myers is not objective as well. Some of the content are not true and some words Mr. Myers used are not appropriate. “As the United States, Europe and the rest of the world struggle to contain the coronavirus pandemic, China has cast itself as a model, bringing down a raging outbreak to the point where the country has begun to lift the kinds of onerous restrictions on life that are now imposed around the world.”(Myers, 2020) We cannot deny that China indeed has succeeded with anti-epidemic work and China’s measures and the anti-epidemic system is a mature and typical one. In addition, Chinese people have been used to wear masks when they are in public places and the health code has been used nationwide. Meanwhile, the pandemic in the United States and other European countries is still serious. So it is helpful for these countries to apply China’s measures. And China is willing to share experiences with the world. In this context, it is not proper to say the China has cast itself as a model, which is a little derogatory. Although we also can not deny that in December 2019 China’s local officials made mistakes in reporting patients with mysterious pneumonia, China’s medical experts have tried their best to do research and find countermeasures to solve problems. So in this piece of news, it is not proper to overemphasize China’s faults and weaken or underestimate China’s donations. One-sided guidance is inadvisable.

### **4. Being Not Objective From the Perspective of Scarcity of Facts**

Michael Schudson said that “The belief on objectivity is a faith in ‘facts’.” (Schudson, 1978, pp.6) Facts is a fundamental factor of objective reporting. So scarcity of facts might be a cause of failing to following the principle of objectivity. In my opinion, some reports related to COVID-19 by *The New York Times* show the problem of scarcity of facts, which means some of them ignore the truth, exaggerate or distort the facts. This way of reporting would leave the readers prejudice and bad impressions on China, which should not be corrected. Journalists need to chase and find out the truth supported by more facts and report them in an accurate way. Then I will give you some examples.

“A mass roundup in central China has been expanded” published on February 13, 2020 describes the situation of a quarantined patient who had the coronavirus. Journalist uses the word of “China’s prison” to describe the Wuhan hotel room used to quarantine patients who had the coronavirus. The word of “prison” is subjective and derogatory and would lead the audience to have a incorrect cognition about the real situation. In addition, this report includes only one patient’s statement, which shows the mistake of overgeneralization. The journalist could do interview with more patients who had the same experience of quarantine with Deng Chao, who was exactly the person the journalist had telephone interview with to know more facts to be more accurate, comprehensive and objective.

In some reports, journalists describe China’s leadership as dictatorial and portray Xi Jinping as an image of rarely appearing in public. In my opinion, journalists thought that it was Xi Jinping’s duty to appear in the front line of anti-epidemic work but ignored to seek facts about what Mr. Xi has done in that period.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, in the process of reporting issues about China, some journalists of *The New York Times* have failed to follow the principle of objectivity. The reasons mainly consist of two aspects. One of them is politics. The differences between the US and China, such as ideology, national interests, political stand, diplomacy, are factors of lacking objectivity. The other one is the scarcity of facts. Some journalists did not chase the facts to support objectivity and they even distort the facts. In my opinion, scarcity of facts is caused by politics. In other words, national differences.

The purpose of this paper is not to denounce the biased way of reporting of *The New York Times*’ journalists. In the contrary, when reporting a certain worldwide event derived from a country which has conflicts of interest with their motherland, it is understandable to report it from journalists’ own perspective. But it doesn’t mean that they are doing it in a right way. Journalist, a sacred profession to report events supported by facts and to let the public get close to the truth, have to make it clear that journalistic objectivity is always significant and cannot be lost even when facing the national interest. Journalists should attempt to provide an impartial report to the public.

In addition, for the people from both countries, should realize that the news reporting is likely to lack in objectivity and it is important to have the ability of discernment and critical thinking. And they would be helpful in creating a healthy and professional environment of journalism, even a better society. The US people should have the willingness and the ability to seek for the facts while the Chinese people should be more positive and effective in putting the facts to the whole world and obtaining the right of speech in the world.

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