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Media Bias in the China-U.S. Trade War

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In January 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump began imposing tariffs and other trade barriers on China, initiating the China-U.S. trade war. Data shows that the U.S. has imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billions of Chinese goods and services, and China has retaliated with tariffs on over \$110 billions of U.S. products.¹ Interestingly, media from both states report differently on events during the trade war, including the origins of the trade war, the various types of tariffs imposed, and the implementation of technology sanctions.

For example, U.S. media generally claims that the domestic motivation for starting the trade war is to prevent China's previously unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft from affecting other

trading partners.² In contrast, Chinese media states that President Trump is trying to curb its rise as a global economic power.³ The two presses also vary in reporting the U.S. technology sanctions on ZTE, a partially Chinese state-owned telecommunications company. The U.S. argues that ZTE has failed to comply with relevant laws and regulations.⁴ On the other side, Chinese media believes that the Trump administration ban has hegemonic considerations, intending to limit China's development in the high-tech field.⁵ In this case, Chinese media persists in defending the interests of Chinese companies.

This article examines the source of media bias in China and U.S. coverage of the trade war. Two states have media bias in reporting the 2018 China-U.S.

trade war for political and economic reasons, and I argue that variation in bias comes from differences in state control over the media, with government-owned Chinese media and privately-owned U.S. media. In the following article, I first outline the importance of news media in shaping public opinion, then analyze the political and economic determinants of media bias in the China-U.S. trade war, and finally conclude with a discussion of future implications.

The Importance of News Media

News media is the main channel through which most Chinese and Americans understand the outside world.⁶ News keeps people informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in a society.⁷ Its convenience, timeliness, and comprehensiveness enable people to learn about another country's social, economic, and political development, and compare it with their own states' socio-economic structure. Hence, the media is significant as it can form and shape people's ideas and attitudes towards foreign policies and countries.⁸ For example, one recent work studies the effects of the media on public opinion and finds that the *New York Times* coverage on China in one year explains 54 percent of the variance in American public opinion on China in the next year.⁹ This result confirms the hypothesized link between media and public attitude and helps shed light on how mass media can influence the public opinion of foreign countries.¹⁰ To this end, the media can affect politics through advocating for specific political norms on behalf of the state governments.¹¹ In other words, governments can use the media to form, disseminate, and control public opinion. Therefore, it is necessary to reveal bias in Chinese and American media to help the public make clear judgments while reading about the 2018 China-U.S. trade war in the news.

Background: Media Bias in the China-U.S. Trade War

Research has shown that both China and the U.S. report negatively towards each other in the trade war in terms of political decision and policy. However, they differ in that Chinese media is supportive towards its own government's foreign policy whereas U.S. media is neutral in reviewing Trump administration regulation.

A recent study by Junming Huang compares and contrasts media bias between China and the United States. She analyzes two central media outlets: the *New York Times* of the U.S. and the *People's Daily* of China. Huang hypothesizes that in reporting the China-U.S. Trade War, the *New York Times* and the *People's Daily* are likely to describe the respective foreign government negatively.¹² She searches online databases from the *New York Times* and the *People's Daily* for terms indicating bias, including "unfair trade practice," "economic loss in China," and "the threat of the U.S." to track the frequency of terms appearing in the news.¹³ Huang assumes that those terms reflect the general attitude of the two media outlets. Other studies also make similar predictions; for example, Louisa Ha and other co-authors hypothesize that U.S. news media are more likely to use war journalism than peace journalism in covering the trade conflict.¹⁴ Similarly, Carpenter also notes the increasing hostility in the journalist community, with polarized accounts of the trade war between American and Chinese media outlets.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, Huang's result shows that in reporting the trade war, the *New York Times* and the *People's Daily* promote a negative attitude when writing the other.¹⁶ For example, most U.S. media regard China's tariff increase as a protection of national interests, rather than a commitment to free trade.¹⁷ They also focus on economic losses caused by China in the tariff dispute, identifying China as a threat.¹⁸ On the other hand, China accuses the U.S. of unilateral,

protectionist trade measures and promoting the “America First” principle. Outlets also report that the U.S. actions violate WTO principles such that accusations against China lack basis.¹⁹

Besides this major finding, Huang finds that the *New York Times* remains neutral and critical towards its own government, whereas the *People’s Daily* generally promotes a more positive frame of China.²⁰ For example, while arguing against China’s actions, U.S. media highlights concerns about the Trump administration’s decision to levy tariffs. As reported by the CNN, most presses praise Trump for investigating China’s advantage in trade, but note that the government has adopted unconventional methods, blindly raising tariffs and distancing the United States from its allies.²¹ The U.S. media thus regards China’s action as aggressive while simultaneously critiquing its domestic government. Chinese media does not follow a similar pattern, only focusing on the positive actions of the Chinese government. When discussing U.S. tariffs, Chinese media claims that China dares to defend its own dignity and should attack and resist to the end, arguing in clear support of the domestic government.²² Media also highlights the tariff dispute as an opportunity for Chinese companies like ZTE, and claims that China should take this lesson further to promote domestic technological innovation and economic structural reform.²³ Examining the above statements, it is clear that Chinese media is critical of the U.S. government for imposing tariffs. However, rather than being critical of its own regime like the U.S., Chinese presses provide a promising future development plan for domestic technology companies and organizations.

Accordingly, in the China-U.S. trade war, Chinese and American media report news from different angles. In general, they are both biased against one another. The U.S. media remains neutral on its own government, even criticizing policies on imposing

tariffs and sanctions. In contrast, the Chinese media only reports their domestic government’s actions in an optimistic way. The following section outlines explanations for both differences and similarities in media bias during the China-U.S. trade war.

Explanations for Media Bias in the Trade War

Media bias in the China-U.S. trade war can be explained from both a political and economic perspective. Difference in state versus private sector ownership provides different incentives for Chinese and American media outlets when reporting on the trade war. Both states’ media outlets share profit-oriented goals, leading to dramatization in order to attract a larger audience. However, the state-owned Chinese media must consistently support the domestic government position on foreign affairs, while the privately-owned U.S. media expresses both critical and supportive statements on domestic trade policy.

Political Perspective: State vs. Private Ownership. Chinese media is largely controlled by the state and used for political purposes. According to Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, all Chinese newspapers are required to be entirely or primarily owned by the state.²⁴ Media organizations must be affiliated with a government supervisor responsible for “licensing, appointing top personnel, and monitoring important editorial matters.”²⁵ In the study, Huang discovers that the reporting by the *People’s Daily* is highly consistent over the period. Many similar themes and narratives appear in different reports, such as the rhetoric of the U.S. attitude, or the expression of attitudes in China.²⁶ Chinese media rigidly follows the government’s regulations, and stories are similar across different sources. Under the control of the Chinese government, the media thus serves as a tool to achieve political goals. Qin states that the foremost political goal is to implement the China Communist Party (CCP) Party Line, a media policy that aims to

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mobilize political actions and regime stability.²⁷ To this end, newspapers must carry out the tasks of propagating the CCP’s ideology and leadership, “informing cadres and the public of Party decisions and government policies, and suppressing news that may negatively affect regime stability.”²⁸ Hence, in the China-U.S. trade war, Chinese media criticizes the U.S. decision to add tariffs and other measures as a way to protect domestic politics.

The story is different on the U.S. side, and research has shown that although some U.S. news media relies on officials and government as sources, private media ownership allows for greater freedom and diversity in reporting. Dickson’s study shows that mainstream presses like the *New York Times* depend on the U.S. foreign policy for information and “serve to sustain” the dominant position of the U.S. government in foreign policy crises.²⁹ In the China-U.S. trade war case, American media reports negatively about China, largely in line with the U.S. government’s policy and regulation. However, as U.S. media outlets are privately-owned, they generally have more freedom than those in China.³⁰ Ha and other co-authors note that the U.S. media has considerable independent judgment on the trade war.³¹ The pluralism in the U.S. news media allows for the existence of diverse opinions, both criticizing and supporting the government. In other words, U.S. news media has mixed support for domestic trade tariff policy, instead of overwhelmingly supporting it as Chinese media

do.³² Accordingly, as the U.S. media is owned by private companies, it is more liberal and critical when reporting news to international audiences. This political difference echoes Huang’s finding that the *New York Times* criticizes China’s violation of the rights and rules, but also expresses concerns regarding future trade war escalation against China.

Economic Perspective: Dramatized Style of Reporting. Both Chinese and American newspapers also have the economic goal of earning profits. As early as 1979, the state granted permission to the *People’s Daily* and several provincial newspapers to earn advertising revenues and seek profits.³³ Since then, general-interest newspapers have been regarded as quasi-SOEs and have operated under the slogan “supervised by politicians and managed by entrepreneurs.”³⁴ At the end of the 1990s, advertising revenues accounted for at least 70 percent of the overall income of the mainstream newspapers in China.³⁵ Similarly, in the United States, the media has historically been motivated by profits. News in the U.S. generates roughly \$63 billion to \$65 billion in annual revenue.³⁶ And with the current digitized world, technology has helped the media industry gain more profits and success.³⁷

Media dramatization, often in a negative way, through titles and visualizations is a strategy to attract attention and increase profits. News articles’ titles like “How Trump Could Stumble From a Trade War

Into a Real War with China,” and phrases like “China and the United States are right on script sleepwalking towards what could be the grandest collision in history” and “I see the current ‘phony war’ as the proverbial calm before the storm” enlarge the conflict between the U.S. and China, attracting audiences’ attention.³⁸ Ultimately, these dramatized words enhance the negativity in news reports from both countries.³⁹

Consequently, media bias in the trade war can be explained both politically and economically. Differences in media ownership—Chinese state-owned and American private-owned media—bring different levels of regulations and freedom to media companies. The economic incentive further increases the likelihood of creating conflict towards each other in reporting.

Conclusion

This paper describes media bias in the 2018 China-U.S. trade war. Specifically, Chinese media tends to negatively discuss the U.S. while remaining optimistic about its own foreign policy and regulations. On the other hand, American media not only criticizes China’s behavior, but also expresses concerns towards the Trump administration’s decision to impose tariffs and ban Chinese high-tech companies. These characteristics can be mostly explained through the political perspective as state-owned Chinese media follow governmental goals of promoting domestic values and policies whereas private-owned U.S. media has more freedom to remain critical and report from different angles.

Media is one of the most efficient and convenient ways of understanding the outside world for many people. However, it is highly likely that the information acquired from those media sources is biased. How and what to report are thus two complicated but critical questions for countries and policymakers to consider. Media can be a tool for

politics, and bias can shape peoples’ opinions on important issues like the China-U.S. trade war. This article highlights how media is typically biased to sensationalize headlines for profits, but that state control of media can result in a favorable bias towards the domestic political regime. This is important due to the broader implications of the China-U.S. trade war; when reporting about this conflict, the media can affect the future of international trade.

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