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# The Framing of China's Bird Flu Epidemic by U.S. Newspapers Influential in China: How the New York Times and The Washington Post Linked the Image of the Nation to the Handling of the Disease

Ning Song

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THE FRAMING OF CHINA'S BIRD FLU EPIDEMIC BY U.S. NEWSPAPERS  
INFLUENTIAL IN CHINA: HOW *THE NEW YORK TIMES* AND THE *WASHINGTON  
POST* LINKED THE IMAGE OF THE NATION TO THE HANDLING OF THE DISEASE

by

NING SONG

Under the Direction of Arla G. Bernstein

ABSTRACT

A framing research study was conducted that analyzed the coverage of the bird flu (avian flu) in China by two major American newspapers that are influential in China (*The New York Times* and *Washington Post*). The goal was to examine how these two prestigious newspapers frame the bird flu epidemic in China and how they represent the country in this international health crisis. This study employed a textual analysis of the way bird flu news articles were framed in terms of problem definition, causal explanation, moral evaluation and solution recommendations in both newspapers. The study found the epidemic was framed as more than just a public health crisis. Multiple news frames were found in both newspapers' coverage of bird flu, depicting the event as a cultural, social and political crisis to the nation and to the world.

INDEX WORDS: Bird flu, SARS, Public health crisis, China, Newspapers, The New York Times, Washington Post, International News, Framing, News frames.

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NING SONG

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Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

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2007

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NING SONG

Major Professor: Arla G. Bernstein  
Committee: Leonard Teel  
Holley Wilkin

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
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*I had a little bird,  
And his name was Enza;  
I opened the window,  
And in flew Enza.*

--Children's song, 1918

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Global Bird Flu Epidemic**

Unlike newly discovered diseases such as Ebola (Hemorrhagic Fever), Mad Cow (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, or BSE) and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), influenza as a human disease has been known for centuries. The word influenza first appeared in 1743 in Italy. Meaning an “invisible visitation,” it referred to a mysterious pandemic that struck the country early in the year (Hakim, 2003). According to *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a pandemic (or a global epidemic) is defined as an outbreak of infectious disease over a wide geographic area and affecting a large proportion of the population. The 20th century witnessed three global human influenza pandemics, namely the 1918 Spanish flu, the 1957 Asian pandemic and the 1968 Hong Kong pandemic (Guang, 2006). Global influenza pandemics caused catastrophic effects and demonstrated what a tiny virus could do to entire human civilizations. Consider the 1918 Spanish Flu for instance. The pandemic received its name because people at the time believed the influenza had started in Spain (Hakim, 2003). It mysteriously struck at about the same time in India, China, Russia and United States. It ravaged the whole world for nine months, affected estimated 20% of the then world population, and killed 50 million people, or quadruple the death toll of the entire

World War I (Hakim, 2003; Guang, 2006). When the next influenza pandemic will hit the world is still a question for scientific discussion. However, as the interval between two worldwide outbreaks has been about 20 to 30 years through out history, experts believe the next pandemic influenza outbreak is imminent, given the fact it has been more than 30 years since the last major flu pandemic struck (Stöhr, 2005).

The outbreak of the bird flu (avian influenza) at the turn of the century therefore adds a graver element to this disturbing prediction. Bird flu has been known for its existence in animals, especially in fowls, for more than a century. Scientific studies indicate human infection of the sub strain of H5N1 avian influenza virus led to the great Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 that killed 50 million people (Guang, 2006). The 1957 Asian pandemic and the 1968 Hong Kong pandemic caused four million and two million deaths respectively (Guang, 2006). A recent major bird flu outbreak occurred in Hong Kong in 1997 in which the virus caused 16 human deaths, evoked great panic among the public and forced the authority to slaughter 12 millions of fowls as a result (Guang, 2006).

Influenza experts from the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) predict the most likely source of the next global human influenza pandemic would be a new virus that combines the existing human influenza virus and the lethal H5N1 sub-strain of bird flu virus. This evolution could be deadly—with experts predicting 28 million people being hospitalized and seven million deaths should we fail to contain this lethal new virus (Stöhr & Esveld, 2004).

While the bird flu has grabbed the attention of the world as the next deadly disease, experts also warn that people should not forget other threats still lingering around. AIDS

(Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), Ebola, Mad Cow Disease, and SARS, to name a few, remind us of how vulnerable human beings could be when a new virus suddenly emerges and hits us hard. Among these diseases, SARS triggers particular interest from this study because it emerged just before bird flu hit China in 2004. The outbreak of SARS in China evoked great criticism about China's handling of the disease and put the country's credibility on the line. Experts argued the SARS crisis had forced China to be more open on sharing information about public health crises, including bird flu (Freedman, 2005).

#### **Background of the Global SARS Crisis**

The outbreak of SARS in 2003 once again demonstrated the kind of damage a new epidemic could cause to the world. The corona viruses that cause SARS once existed exclusively in small mammals such as masked palm civets. This virus was passed to humans as people in southern China began to add the animals into their exotic food menus (Bell, Robertson & Hunter, 2004). While the viruses caused only mild illness to the original animal hosts, SARS proved highly infectious and deadly to humans (Stöhr & Esveld, 2004). SARS had disastrous effects. It killed in thousands. It significantly damaged international commerce as it struck some of the most vibrant regions of global production and consumption. In China, where SARS hit the hardest, the whole nation was forced into a campaign to stop the disease. In the peak of the outbreak, schools across the country were closed; public transportation halted; and factories and business were shut down. As the nation suffered economic recession, billions still had to be spent on quarantine, vaccines, medical treatments, equipment and compensations. Statistics shows

that in 2003 alone, the Chinese government spent 13.4 billion Yuan (approximately 1.6 billion USD) in the fight against SARS (Jia, 2004).

A close examination of SARS and bird flu epidemic reveals some common characteristics shared by the two. Both viruses can pass from animals to humans. Both viruses are alleged to first break out in the Guangdong province—an economic powerhouse located in southern China—then spread all over the nation and to the world. Both epidemics, with their deadly nature, caused great panic amongst the public. Animals like masked palm civets, chickens and ducks were slaughtered in tens of millions as a precaution measure. News reports showed that even pet dogs and cats were abandoned in the fear that they may carry these deadly viruses (Epstein, 2003).

The overall economic impact of both pandemics was significant. Besides the huge amount of money spent on disease prevention, vaccination, treatment and compensation for animal culling, both outbreaks were also accompanied by recession in agriculture, food, transportation, international commerce and tourist industries (Jia, 2004). For example, the giant chicken chain KFC, which had been expanding quickly ever since it entered the Chinese market, suffered an unprecedented slow-down from 2003 to 2005. Despite the company's campaign to encourage customers to eat out and airing "no diseases in KFC" commercials during both SARS and bird flu outbreaks (China Daily, 2004, February 5), by the month China reported its first human bird flu case, the company reported low sales growth of eight percent in comparison to the 24 percent growth just two years ago (AP, 2005). Industry analysts attribute the poor market growth to the impact of public health crises, predicting, "Headlines from the avian flu situation

will continue to weigh on overall consumer sentiment towards chicken in China.” (AP, 2005, November 7) In one analyst’s article, poultry demand in parts of Europe and Asia were reported to slip 20 to 40% in the fear of bird flu (AP, 2005, November 8).

Despite the similarity of the two crises in China, there are also some significant differences. First of all, SARS can pass directly from human to human, which is a characteristic not yet seen in the H5N1 viruses (W.H.O., 2006). Secondly, animals that carry SARS viruses can live healthily while the H5N1 virus is lethal to both its animal and human hosts. Most SARS cases occurred in the Mainland China, geographically more concentrated than bird flu, which cases were reported all over the world. In terms of duration, the SARS crisis lasted about half a year; it disappeared just as suddenly as it emerged. Bird flu, on the other hand, may stay with us for a long period of time. In fact, two years after its last major outbreak in 2004, animal and human death cases now still hit the headlines from time to time (McNeil, 2006; Zamiska, 2007).

#### **News Framing on Pandemics**

As two major international health crises, both the SARS in 2003 and the bird flu outbreaks in 2005 caused great media sensation. Both crises received tremendous media attention. Thanks to the unremitting media coverage around the globe, both SARS and bird flu became household words overnight that strike fear into the hearts of people. They are portrayed as suddenly emerging deadly diseases that could travel anywhere and hit anyone in the world (Freedman, 2005).

Western news media were among the most intense critics of some governments’ handling of the SARS outbreak (Pomfret, 2003). China was caught in the crossfire of

American news media as China's attempts to cover up the nature of the outbreak were revealed (Freedman, 2005). The disclosure triggered a tidal wave of criticism. Under great domestic and international pressure, the government finally made a complete turnaround to directly confront the disease and punish officials that were responsible for the cover-up (Freedman, 2005). Although some critics claimed the dramatic change of Chinese government's reaction to SARS was largely due to the result of its internal power struggle, the intensive media coverage and the resulting international attention and pressure inevitably had a major influence on the way the government diverted its SARS strategy (Freedman, 2005; Huang & Leung 2005) .

### **Significance of the Study**

The bird flu epidemic could be considered the first major health crisis caught in the aftershock of the SARS epidemic in China. Although the government's response to this new epidemic was prompt (and arguably more open), it is still commonly suspected that the government might try to hold back information or lowball the real extent of the crisis (Enserink, 2005). On the other hand, considering the fact the Chinese government had been bombarded with heavy domestic and international criticism during the SARS crisis, many also suggested it had learned its lessons and would be more open toward revealing information about the new pandemic and acting properly to rebuild its credibility and international image (Dickson, 2004; Freedman, 2005). Dickson, the director of the *Science Development Network*, made the following comment in an editorial about the challenges that faced the Chinese government in its combat with bird flu:

China learnt—the hard way—that in an age of global information flows, knowledge of public health events cannot be suppressed; even more important, it learnt that any attempt to suppress such knowledge only generates distrust.... In general, the Chinese authorities appear to have been keen to learn from their previous mistakes. Substantial efforts have been made to keep the public informed [of the bird flu information]; for example, the government has organized regular press conferences intended to inform the public about current efforts to contain the disease.

The role of news media in the global combat against the bird flu is paramount. In the age of global communication, people rely on mass media for stories taking place at



the other end of the world. News media help create images of foreign people and events—their reporting of foreign events largely shape their home readers/viewers' awareness and perception of what is going on (or going wrong) in the world. In a global health crisis such as SARS and bird flu, news media should play a critical role in prompting governments to act responsibly, to open up information channels, to communicate facts and to achieve more transparency at various levels of decision-making in national crises (Dickson, 2004).

The intensive coverage of the SARS and bird flu by news media also raises questions about media's roles in objectively reporting foreign matters, or more precisely, foreign crises (Huang & Leung, 2005). To what extent does the framing of a specific event, like bird flu, reflect the existing Chinese frames in the U.S. news media? As the previous literature on international news reporting provide us with theoretical frameworks and methodologies to conduct a study that might answer the question, existing academic literature on the specific subject—the media framing of bird flu—is still relatively scarce, which is largely due to the fact it is still a new and ongoing event. Therefore, by exploring news media, or more specifically, newspapers' coverage of this ongoing health crisis in China, it is hoped that this study could answer the above-mentioned questions and eventually contribute to the literature on framing China and framing international news in general.

## Literature Review

In order to better understand the dynamics between social crises and media's coverage of them (and the potential impact this coverage could bring about), it is critical to analyze the methods that media use in their news coverage. One such approach is to study how mass media frame their news coverage. This literature review section will first give a brief introduction on the general framing concept, its role in news reports and its relation to ideology of a society. It will be followed by a review of studies on the American newspaper's Chinese frames with an emphasis on framing the specific health crises: the SARS and the bird flu outbreaks.

Framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993). In her book *Making News*, Tuchman (1980) described how journalists' news coverage decisions are governed by reified organizational routines, which includes the use of pre-existing frames that routinize certain places and ideas while closing off and blocking inquiry into others. McCoombs (2004, 87) offered an adequate definition of framing in the context of news media, which describes a news frame as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of *selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration*." This definition of framing clearly echoes Entman's description of news frames. In his effort to refine the definition of framing in news, Entman (1993) describes the concept as follows:

Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to *promote a particular problem*

*definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (52)

Entman's definition therefore highlights the four major functions of framing in news. According to Entman (1993), these functions could be exemplified by Gamson's example of the coverage of third world nation civil wars, in which American media attribute civil wars in developing countries as problems (problem definition) caused by communist rebels (causal interpretation) that were aggressive (moral judgment) and should be suppressed by the U.S. government by helping the non-communist side (solution recommendation).

To encompass the concept of news framing into a broader social and cultural context, Entman (1993) also points out the four locations of frames in the communication process: *communicators, text, receiver* and *culture*. First, *communicators* make framing judgments, both consciously and unconsciously, to decide what to say. The *text* contains frames that are manifested by the presence of keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide "thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993. 52). This *text* is then received by the *receiver's*, whose thinking and conclusion may or may not reflect the frames in the text and the framing intention of the communicator. And at last, the *culture* is the stock of commonly invoked frames (Entman, 1993).

Arguably, journalists hold multiple roles in this fourfold structure of news framing. First of all, journalists are, in their nature, communicators. They create frame-packed texts and convey their messages to their audiences—the receivers. Secondly, they

themselves inevitably are the receivers of frame-packed texts that have saturated their everyday contexts; that come with their educations, professional trainings and most importantly, from the culture as a whole. Journalists' works, on the other hand, perform a crucial function as to create, mold and preserve certain opinions, viewpoints and worldviews that are agreed upon by the culture. By and large, in today's context of global communication and monopolistic media, as dominant Western media have extended their influences beyond national borders, their roles in the news framing therefore should not be confined only to their home culture but are to be examined in a global context (Huang & Leung, 2005).

#### **Framing news with ideological frames**

Before continuing this discussion about *how* media frame their news in certain ways instead of others, some legitimate questions to ask could be: *why* they do so, or, to put it another way, whose story is being told or whose value do they support? The majority of media scholars agree that journalists' rhetorical decisions are never neutral (Mumby, 1993). As Entman (1993, 57) describes it, journalists may follow the rules for "objectivity reporting" but at the same time still "convey a dominant framing of the news text" that would prevent most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation. Journalists' literatures inevitably carry political and ideological implications (Becker, 1984). Scholars suggest that there are three types of ideology that significantly influence framing of news in media: dominant ideology, elite ideology and journalistic ideology (Becker, 1984; Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000).

The dominant American ideology includes perspectives on human nature, society,

and politics, which central ideas including democracy, freedom, equality, and capitalism (Ryn, 2003). The American elite ideology is defined as the ideology or policy orientation of the government or administration in power (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000). In most cases, dominant ideology and elite ideology go hand in hand, sharing most values with each other (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000).

Entman (1993) points out that political elites control the framing of issues in a democratic process, which gives them an upper hand in determining what public opinion could be in a democratic society. Previous study also argue that media frames are most likely to come from the ideologically limited dominant culture, which forces news into a single interpretative context that reinforces the dominant/elite ideology (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000).

The third ideology that exerts influence on journalists' work is their occupational ideology. After all, journalists' framing of news is most directly guided by their own perceived reality and by their values and professional guidelines. Some of these guidelines and values are referred to as objectivity, balance and new values that emphasize novelty, dramatic events and conflicts (Entman, 1993). As mentioned above, journalists' professional ideology reflects the dominant and elite ideology in many ways. And it also helps reinforcing the dominant/elite ideology.

This study anticipates that all three types of ideology would function as sources of framing in Western media's China coverage, namely the SARS and bird flu outbreaks. A close look at previous studies on American media reveals that such ideological sources do exist and also play a critical role in these news outlets' reporting on Chinese events. This

ideological news framing could also be observed in news media's coverage of foreign events, or as the next section will discuss, the framing of *others*.

### **Framing *Others***

The inequality of information flow in the global media market has triggered intense debates internationally. Developing nations complain that the globally dominating Western news agencies cover the third world nations in a sparse and unrepresentative manner (Perry, 1997). In this light, Western media are accused of constructing stereotyped and biased images of the developing nations to marginalize underprivileged nations and to justify Western superiority (Perry, 1997). Although arguably every nation has the means to construct and disseminate its own national image by controlling and maintaining its domestic mass media, poor nations often find themselves unable to compete with the global hegemonic Western media over their voices.

In studies of media's news coverage, a frequently mentioned concept is the representation of *us* and *other*. This concept constructs contrasting images of *other* people that are often defined by their different race, ethnicity or nationality as compared with *us* (Fursich, 2002). For example, Huang and Leung (2005) concluded that American newspapers commonly frame international news about developing "others" (nations) with negative, stereotyped and crisis-oriented frames and a general looking-down attitude

The concept of representation of *other* supports the theory of ideological news framing in media's production of international news. Lee, Pan, Chan, and So (2002) argue that a nation has to construct the "*other*" in order to anchor the "*us*". As for the media, the U.S. media often make "worthy victims" out of third world nations,

communist regimes or former communist countries to “highlight the superiority of capitalist democracy” (Lee, Pan, Chan & So, 2002, 350).

The framing of the “*other*” in health news is consistent with the idea of ideological news framing in media’s production of international news. For example, a study found “4H’s” in the news framing of AIDS—homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts and Haitians; the disease was portrayed as more risky to these groups than to “us” (Sabatier, 1988). The repeating themes of “healthy us” and “diseased others” are also found in the American wire services’ international health coverage (Bardhan, 2001). They tend to cover international pandemics from the perspective of the western developed world, whereas news sources from poor nations in Africa, Central and South America and Asia are silenced, leaving these nations to largely unbalanced and negative health news (Bardhan, 2001).

### **Chinese frames in the U.S. news media**

The Chinese frames in the mainstream American newspapers exemplify this concept of *other*. Previous studies demonstrate that American media usually take a highly criticizing position when it comes to report matters in China, especially when related to themes of liberalism, democracy and human rights (Dorogi, 2001). Mann (1999), a former *Los Angeles Time* correspondent in Beijing, points out that American media are loyal to the dominant frame on China and tend to fit their coverage into oversimplified cold-war style criticisms such as flawed communism, deceitful government and corrupted officials, therefore leaving the complexity that might have been involved in any events unmentioned.

As some of these persisting frames have existed for decades since the Communist Party of China (CPC) came to power in 1949, some studies point out that these major frames had, in times, been adjusted accordingly to fit the changing dominant/elite ideology of the United States. For instance, a study found that the American newspapers framed China with fewer ideologically packed symbols during President Nixon's first visit to Beijing in 1971 (Chang, 1988). In another study on Nixon's visit, Wang (1991, 61) found that China was described as a friendly socialist country that was full of cultural heritage instead of the more frequently used negative frames of the time, such as the image of a evil Communist hermit. Nixon's visit to China marked a starting point for the rebuilding of bilateral relations between the U.S. and China. To accommodate this new political wind, newspapers changed their Chinese frames considerably, therefore creating a much-needed positive image of the country in order to legitimate the dominant political needs and to justify decisions for improving bilateral relations. When China further opened its door to the outside world and improved its relations with the Western powers in the early 1980s—the so-called “honeymoon” period—American media's framing of the nation was seen to be more relenting than in the previous decades (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000). However, the enhanced international image was ended after the controversial democracy movement took place in 1989.

The brutal crackdown of the democracy movement in 1989 shocked the world. Through the viewfinder (and therefore a *frame* in a most direct way) of an AP photojournalist's camera, the democracy movement was immortalized with the iconic image of a thin man in a white shirt singlehandedly blocking a fleet of marching tanks



near the Tiananmen Square, signifying the whole event as brave ordinary people uprising desperately against the brutal and fiercely armed communist suppressors (for the online video footage, visit: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/view/>).

Some scholars, like Mann (1999), consider the democracy movement of 1989 as the beginning of the return of the anti-communist frame and an image nadir of China in American news media's coverage. Since then, scholars have reported a slow but gradually improved Chinese image in the American newspapers (Liss, 2003; Wang, 2006).

In the 2006 China International Public Relations Congress that was held in Beijing, Wang (2006) presented a report on international media's China coverage. The study content analyzed 243 news reports about China in three mainstream English newspapers in 2005 in both the U.S. and the U.K. The study found that these newspapers had diversified coverage (positive, neutral and negative) of China, in general, positive images are associated with China's traditional culture and recent fast economic growth; the political images are generally covered with neutral (international political influence, voice in the world) to negative tones (military build-up, challenge to the U.S. supremacy, corrupted officials, internal power struggle, suppression of democracy and human rights). The public health, welfare and environmental issues in China, as a third aspect frequently addressed in news, are mostly projected with negative tones (Wang, 2006). Despite a gradual and steady improvement of China's international image among Western media suggested by the report, the study indicated the main themes of media coverage of China are still generally negative, stereotyped and within the cold-war ideology frames (Wang, 2006). The results of this study are consistent with other studies on the international

media coverage of China that frequently discover a tight focus on subjects such as political unrests, social upheavals and natural/human disasters (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000).

Among the criticisms China received from the international news media, a frequently employed frame is the “deceitfulness” of the communist government. The Chinese government is constantly framed as an outright liar who manipulates the state-run mass media to prevent negative news from leaking out by the means of banning reports, down-playing or covering-up when major natural disasters or social crises strike (Kobland, Du & Kuan, 1992). For example, the media coverage of the water contamination incident in northern China in November 2005 highlighted a cover-up. In the incident, an explosion at a chemical plant released over 100 tons of toxic chemicals into a river that supplies drinking water for the city of Harbin. Local officials initially denied the water pollution but instead announced the city water supply system would be shut down for "routine maintenance" (Yardley, 2005, November 26). According to the news articles, the cover-up attempt impeded central government's efforts to manage the crisis, caused panic among the citizens of the city, and led to a diplomatic incident with the neighboring Russia (Yardley, 2005, November 26). News articles from both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* carried their coverage of the incident with strong criticizing tones, associating the cover-up case with other incidences such as the SARS crisis and the new bird flu outbreaks across the nation (Yardley, 2005, November 26; Pan, 2005, November 27). Indeed, as two major public health crises in China, SARS and the bird flu outbreaks have provided, and will continue to provide, ammo for Western media

in their criticizing coverage of China and China's events.

### **Framing Diseases in China**

The media's coverage of the SARS outbreaks in China and the governmental cover-up scandals received strong interest from communication scholars. A common theme is how international news media framed this event. For instance, Huang and Leung (2005) content analyzed the SARS coverage of three English-language newspapers: *Washington Post*, *The Strait Times* of Singapore and *The Globe and Mail* of Canada. The study compared and contrasted how the newspapers framed the SARS outbreaks in China and Vietnam respectively. It found that despite the similarities the two countries shared (one-party rule, communist government, problematic health conditions, and the level of impact by the disease), Vietnam received more positive media framing than China from these newspapers. The researchers identified the dominant Chinese frames found in the news coverage as "institutional problems", "power struggle", "local officialdom problems" and "health and environmental issues" (Huang & Leung, 2005). Within these newspapers, China was depicted as a country with primitive and backward health conditions, with unethical local officials that suppress unfavorable news and an incompetent authoritarian government that is full of dark secrets and power struggle. On the other hand, the same crisis in Vietnam was framed in more positive light as having an "open communication strategy" and "cooperative government" (Huang & Leung, 2005, 310). The authors argue that these framing differences are the result of media's response to the two government's different handling of the outbreak. Vietnam's prompt and more open reaction received credits from the international media, whereas China was presented by the same media as

irresponsible and unethical in a global crisis, which image, the authors argue, has deeply hurt its economy and international credibility (Huang & Leung, 2005).

Freedman (2005) found that the mainstream American newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week*, covered the SARS crisis in China with great intensity. In her essay about the political impact of the SARS outbreak on the Chinese Communist Party, Freedman (2005) argued that the intensive criticism from the international news media caused significant political impact on the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party by projecting the image worldwide of an incompetent and deceitful government whose unwillingness to cooperate with the outside world caused the escalation of the deadly disease.

In contrast to scholars' interest on media's SARS coverage, there is no published research concerning media coverage of the bird flu outbreaks. This is possibly due to the fact that this outbreak is still a fairly new and ongoing event. However, as the bird flu poses a serious threat to the world, to analyze media's role in communicating information about the disease is not only necessary, but essential in the global efforts to prevent this worldwide health crisis from happening. In addition to that, how some U.S. newspapers cover this national health crisis and how they associate this specific event with the previous Chinese frames also questions of interest for this study. To answer these questions, qualitative textual analysis was employed. The validity of this research method in news content study is shown in the following sections.

## Research Method

### Research questions:

This qualitative textual analysis study aims to address the following two research questions:

1. How did *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* frame the bird flu in China (from November 1, 2005 to July 31, 2006) as a health, political and social crisis?
2. To what extent does the framing of bird flu news by the two newspapers reflect the existing Chinese frames in the mainstream American newspapers?

This study examines international news reports of a major health crisis in China—the bird flu epidemic. News frames refer to narrative devices and structures that are used repeatedly over time to tell news stories, which persistency gives them the power to affect the audience's understanding of certain phenomena (D'Angelo, 2002). While numerous previous studies have employed quantitative methods, content analyses in particular, in news framing studies, some scholars point out the limitation of this research method. Entman (1993) described researchers' tendency to engage a simplified quantitative research method in their analysis that resulting with simple number counting of positive and negative frames, which may lead to misrepresentation of media message. However, it could be argued that the most important frame may not necessarily be the one most

frequently repeated in news coverage. Entman (1993, 53) pointed out that though salience (the process of making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences) could be achieved by repetition, an appearance of a notion in even an obscure part of the text might still be highly salient if it is consistent with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief systems. In other word, a powerful concept that might be crucial to the frames of a text may not be the one that repeat most often as long as it confirms to the receiver's belief systems.

Therefore, researcher's tendency to oversimplify quantitative content analysis into simple positive and negative frame numbers counting may undermine the validity of research results. To avoid this disadvantage, this study employed qualitative textual analysis in order to yield in-depth understanding of frames of an international health crisis by two privileged American newspapers.

To support the validity of qualitative textual analysis as a research method for media framing study, Hall (1975) wrote:

Literary-critical, linguistic and stylistic methods of analysis are, by contrast, more useful in penetrating the latent meaning of a text, and they preserve something of the complexity of language and connotation which has to be sacrificed in content analysis in order to achieve high validation (15).

Typical news frames diagnose the news event, give moral evaluation and prescribe solutions to it. Frames, in this view, "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation"

(Entman, 1993, 52). Entman's description of framing's functions specifies the four areas of focus for the textual analysis in this study. This study aims to explore the existing news materials to answer the questions of how these two newspapers define the bird flu situation in China (which answers might include: local/global public health crisis, economic disaster, political conjuncture), interpret it (e.g., government's failure to deal with the crisis, intention to cover up or government's efforts to contain the outbreaks), evaluate it (e.g., untrustworthy/ incompetent communist regime, poor health conditions, more openness toward outbreaks information) and prescribe recommendation to it (demand more governmental openness, cooperation with international society or strict international surveillance).

As Entman (1993) exemplified regarding the framing of AIDS in the U.S. (civil liberties frame versus public health considerations frame), framing a health issue is inevitably framing a social issue. The same argument could apply to this study as well: to frame the bird flu issue in China is, not surprisingly, to frame a Chinese issue. As previously demonstrated in this paper, some consistent frames have existed in American media's Chinese coverage, which exert significant influence on both media's reporting and audience's schemata. To what extent does the framing of bird flu carry on these Chinese frames or does it go beyond the existing frames are questions that need to be addressed.

### **Target media and time span**

Communication scholars often list newspapers as the most frequently used source for news studies (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). For this study, two daily newspapers are

selected: *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both newspapers are world-renowned news media that are known as “newspaper of record” for their strong news coverage and insightful editorials (Zhang & Cameron, 2003). Both are major world news providers for political and corporate leaders in both the U.S. and China and have substantial influence on foreign policies and international politics (Zhang & Cameron, 2003). Both newspapers have extensive coverage of Chinese news ranging from political, social to cultural events (Ching, 2003). News articles from both newspapers were frequently translated into Chinese and being quoted in major Chinese press (Ching, 2003). Finally, both newspapers have been targets for news studies, especially from Chinese scholars, to analyze U.S. newspapers’ representation of China for their intensive coverage of Chinese news. For example, Goodman (1999) analyzed the news coverage of China in *The New York Times* and *the Washington Post*. The study found that 24% of the stories from the two newspapers dealt with severe crisis, 70% with conflict, and 32% with violence (Goodman, 1999). Li and Cyr (1998) found *The New York Times* covered the human rights issues in China with an increasing intensity in the 1990s. In another study of American newspapers’ Chinese coverage, Ching (2003) found that although the U.S. press adopted an anti-Chinese position since the democracy movement in 1989, articles on Chinese lifestyle and social attitudes begun to appear in major US newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *the Washington Post*, promoting a more objective view of China.

This study covers a nine-month period from November 1, 2005 to July 31, 2006. Although animal infection and death cases had been reported in China long before November 2005, the first human death in China was recorded on November 16,



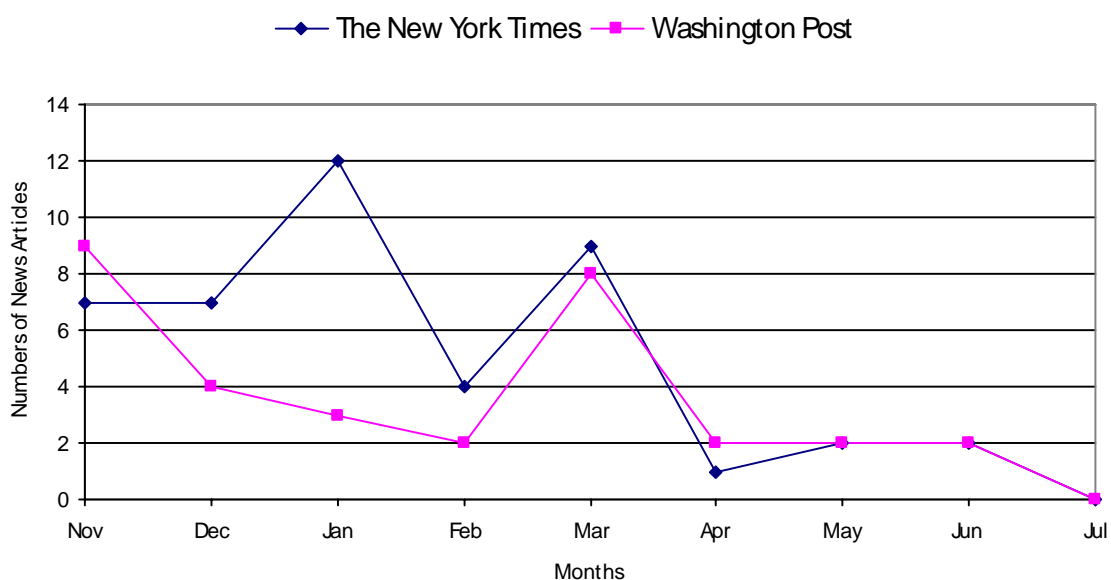
prompting increased media coverage. By July 31, 2006, the Chinese government had confirmed more than a dozen of animal infection and deaths cases in different provinces. Meanwhile, millions of animals were culled in the regions of outbreaks. As to the human infection situation, 19 cases were reported with a death toll of 12 patients in the same period. During the period under study, the government put forth great efforts to halt the spread of the disease among animals and humans. Meanwhile, as the disease became an increasing threat, both domestic and international media coverage intensified.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The database used in this study is *LexisNexis Academic Universe*. The key words “bird flu” and “China” were used in full-text searches of the two newspapers to extract all news/editorials or other related articles in the period of study (the more technical term of the disease—avian influenza—was also tested as a key word and achieved the same search results). To test data accuracy, the data obtained from *LexisNexis Academic Universe* were compared with the search results from the two newspapers’ official websites applying the same search keywords. The search results from the two sources matched with each other.

For the period under study, all the news articles obtained by the search engine were reviewed. As a result, a total of 76 news articles were included in this study, with 44 articles retrieved from *The New York Times* and 32 from the *Washington Post* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of News Articles From November 1, 2005 to July 31, 2006



Each news article was dissected to study how the flu news are framed to *define* the bird flu problem, to *interpret* the reason for massive outbreaks, to *evaluate* the situation and to *recommend* treatment for the crisis, with attention to the themes, tone, similes, and metaphors that were used in the framing of news stories. News articles were put into one of three categories: generally negative, neutral and generally positive news. Each bird flu news article was judged by its dominant and repetitive themes to determine whether it was framed with a positive, neutral or negative tone. News briefs regarding bird flu outbreak or human infection statistics were considered as neutral frames. News frames with criticizing tone—identifying public health problems, environmental issues,

unhealthy housing practices, poverty, corruption, secretive local officialdom, governmental cover-up and political structural problems, for instance, were considered as negative frames. On the other hand, news frames that were considered as positive frames may include positive comments on governmental response to the disease, nation-wide vaccination campaign, research for new drugs and information sharing with international organizations. This study anticipated finding mainly neutral frames in news briefs from both newspapers; it also anticipated finding a mixture of positive/negative/neutral frames in the majority of longer news articles with a possible focus on the negative news frames. As to the question of how the two newspapers frame the bird flu news compared with existing Chinese frames, this study also analyzed the inclusion of other significant topics, especially the ideological frame, the cover-up of SARS and the water contamination accident, in the bird flu news. The news coverage from the two newspapers was also compared with each other to detect any significant difference in their way of covering bird flu news.

### **Analysis of Texts**

Despite the fact that bird flu outbreaks and human fatality cases can be dated back to 1997 in Hong Kong and then in 2003 as it re-emerged in various Asian countries, it was not until November 2005 that the first human infection cases were reported in China (Bradsher, 2005). These new human fatality cases dramatically increased media's attention to the bird flu outbreaks in China. This can be demonstrated by the sheer surge of news on the issue in both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* during the study time period. Compared to the previous month (October, 2005) in which the *Washington Post* had a single report on China's bird flu control measures (Pan, October 29, 2005) and *The New York Times* had no reports at all, in November the two newspapers had 13 and 16 reports, respectively, on the China's bird flu outbreaks. What follows are month-by-month summaries of news coverage during the study time period of November 2005 to July 2006.

#### ***November 2005 coverage:***

##### ***First human death cases***

In November, 2005, 16 pieces of bird flu news appeared in the two newspapers. The selected news pieces range from straightforward news of outbreaks and animals/humans death toll to long, in-depth stories using strong criticizing tones.

The first news pieces from both *The New York Times* (*Times* for short) and the *Washington Post* (*Post* for short) in the month were published on November 5 (World in Brief; More bird flu is reported in Asia). The two news pieces reported on the emerging bird flu cases in China and Vietnam. Though at the time no human case had been reported

in China, the news warned, citing “authorities”, that “one would be inevitable if the Chinese government cannot stop repeated outbreaks in poultry” (More bird flu is reported in Asia, 2005, November 5). *Post’s* report also referred to experts who pointed out the potential of the virus to mutate into a form that can easily spread among humans and “start a worldwide pandemic” (World in brief, 2005, November 5).

In the next *Times* article about America’s preparedness of the possible bird flu outbreak, China, along with Vietnam, was highlighted in a paragraph (McNeil, 2005, November 6). It talked about how local farmers were unwilling to cull their flocks because the promised compensation from the government often went unpaid (McNeil, 2005, November 6). *Post*, in a similar article about U.S. agencies’ preparedness for a possible outbreak, both bird flu and SARS were identified as originating in China (Brown, 2005, November 7). Noticeably, this is the first time bird flu was said to have a Chinese origin in the two newspapers during the period of study. From this point forward, both newspapers would continue to refer to China as the origin of the disease—even after new findings proved that the virus were originated in Vietnam (Rosenthal, 2006, March 6). On reporting the latest outbreak development, the *Post* article on November 7 also discussed the evidence of the disease reaching central Europe; as the disease went westbound, the newspaper pointed out that people realized bird flu was “no longer an Asian problem” (Brown, 2005, November 7).

#### *Reporting human deaths*

The second report in the *Times* on China’s bird flu situation came on November 7. The news reported the first three possible human cases in China, including a 12-year-old

girl who died (Yardley, 2005, November 7). The girl was reportedly diagnosed first with pneumonia and then, after “warning for more extensive testing from the W.H.O.,” was found positive for H5N1 virus (Yardley, 2005, November 7). This news piece highlighted the watchdog role of international organizations—W.H.O. in this case—in the bird flu crisis in China. It implied that if it had not been for the extra push by the health organization, this misdiagnosis of the human case would have been undiscovered. The article questioned China’s capability to deal with the disease by stating the medical examination results from China as unreliable. On the other hand, as to China’s public health condition, the report cited “international officials” on the issue of close proximity between people and animals, which the article stated could expose people to deadly bird flu virus (Yardley, 2005, November 7). As this study will show, “chicken and people live under the same roof” would become a repeating frame in both newspapers’ coverage to explain the widespread outbreaks of the disease.

In comparison to the *Times*’ detailed report, *Post* only briefly summarized the first human cases in China and provided the plain news that the country killed six million birds around its latest outbreak site (World in brief, 2005, November 8).

On November 16, both newspapers reported on China’s announcement to vaccinate all of its 14 billion chickens, geese and ducks (Cody, 2005, November 16; Bradsher & Rosenthal, 2005, November 16). Both reports talked about the deadly nature of the virus and the fact it had not evolved into a form that can pass between people; both referred to the recent human fatality case in China; and both predicted the massive vaccination campaign would be difficult for the amount of vaccines needed to produce and the

enormous manpower required to reach the countless backyard flocks scattered along the country (Cody, 2005, November 16; Bradsher & Rosenthal, 2005, November 16). The *Times*' article mentioned a fake vaccine had circulated in China. It also questioned the rationale for such a huge national vaccination campaign because China previously asserted that outbreaks had been under control. An action of such a scale, as the *Times*' article suggested, should only be done in regions "where the virus has become endemic" (Bradsher & Rosenthal, 2005, November 16). It then went on saying China's denial of any large-scale pandemic and its action to vaccinate all domestic birds created a contradiction, which could lead to more questions on the country's candidness on the real scale of bird flu outbreaks.

The report by *Post*, in comparison, framed the same news with a more positive tone of China's determination and eagerness to check the disease (Cody, 2005, November 16). It was followed by commentary that the international society closely watched the Chinese government's attitude toward "acknowledging outbreaks and taking decisive actions accordingly". To explain the reason for this international scrutiny, the article once again turned to China's mishandling of SARS two years ago, saying the government's attempts to conceal the disease information left the world in danger and created distrust internationally (Cody, 2005, November 16).

On the next day (November 17), *Post* reported China's second human death case due to bird flu; a 24-year-old poultry farmer died from the disease (Cody, 2005, November 17). The news appeared in the news brief section and contained only straightforward information about the death case. In comparison, the report in the *Times*

on the same human case news (Bradsher, 2005, November 17) narrated the story with an apparent approach of ethics. The *Times*' report started with positive comment on China's admission of human infection cases, stating it marked a "far-reaching change in how China handles the emergence of new diseases" (Bradsher, 2005, November 17). The news commended this new approach as it contrasts markedly with the practice during the SARS crisis, during which officials concealed the news of the disease for months until it ran out of control. It suggested China had learned its lesson from SARS (Bradsher, 2005, November 17). While the article gave China some positive moral credits for its actions, it quickly turned to the problems the country had in fighting the disease. It first focused on the local officials' reluctance to investigate new cases and then questioned China's case confirmation mechanism. The news questioned the medical procedure as "pretty problematic", referring to misdiagnosis of China's first reported death case caused by the inadequate sampling before the body was cremated (Bradsher, 2005, November 17).

On November 18, the financial section of *Post* ran a long story on the production of star anise—a fruit used to produce *Tamiflu* that was used to cure bird flu in humans—in China (Goodman, 2005, November 18). The story once again raises attention to the unique definition of China's role in this global fight of bird flu. On one hand, China was described as the breeding ground of the bird flu virus, with its "crowded cities and villages chockablock with pork and poultry farms" (Goodman, 2005, November 18). On the other hand, because the nation grew two-thirds of the natural ingredient that produces *Tamiflu*—a crucial drug for treating human bird flu symptoms, the report also said the country "hold[s] the antidote" and it "literately grow on trees" (Goodman, 2005,



November 18). As the demand of the drug increased, the report stated, local economies boomed. However, it went on to say the benefits rarely go to the farmers who plant the fruit since they need to sell them fast against any uncertainty, resulting in middlemen cutting off most of the profits (Goodman, 2005, November 18). “If Chinese farmers have learned anything from the past”, the report commented, “it is that famine and chaos can arrive with little warning. Conditioned against speculation, most farmers here sell what they have as soon as they have it” (Goodman, 2005, November 18).

*Post* carried the next bird flu news on November 20. Titled “China’s remote villages portend a tough fight against bird flu”, the news had some in-depth report on the impact at the village level to the government’s plan to vaccinate its total 14 billion of fowls (Cody, 2005, November 20). The news article begins with a typical depiction of a Chinese village where “chicken ranged freely down the single mud lane...pecking at stray seeds and scattering with excited clucks when the dogs came barking” (Cody, 2005, November 20). The story body was about a day of vaccination work for a local vaccine group. With the critics of the ill-equipped, unprofessionally trained and negligent vaccine team, the news not only created an image of a troubled grassroots effort struggling with a health crisis, but also put more question marks on the nation’s assertion that the disease was under control. In addition, the mobilization of the country into the disease control campaign also provoked memories of China’s Stalinist past, or as the news commented, “this campaign evoked images of the all-out campaigns of the past, when all of China seemed to be swatting flies during an infestation in the 1960s, for instance, or when millions built miniature steel ovens in their back yards in response to an appeal from Mao

Zedong” (Cody, 2005, November 20). An analogy that compared the vaccination campaign to China’s frenzied political past not only reminded us of the country’s Communist ideological past but also put more question on the rationale behind the ambitious nation-wide vaccination plan, which the newspaper claimed to be “more an aspirational goal than a practical plan” (Cody, 2005, November 20).

China’s vaccination plan also received attention from *Times*. As the country announced its vaccination plan, the newspaper reported on the fake or substandard vaccines circulating in the market which activity was said to worsen the outbreaks (Sipress, 2005, November 22). The news reported that the Chinese government disclosed that unlicensed vaccines had been sold in black markets, causing what an official called “incalculable” harm (Sipress, 2005, November 22). It also questioned the quality of vaccines that were made by authorized manufacturers; quoting “international health experts” suspected that many vaccines marketed by Chinese manufactures may have substandard qualities (Sipress, 2005, November 22). As Chinese vaccines were used in the vaccination campaign in Vietnam, the newspaper also expressed concern that low-quality Chinese vaccine might have caused harm there because “nobody has enough information about the content of the vaccine. There is no test being done on the vaccine on a regular basis” (Sipress, 2005, November 22).

From November 22 to 26, *Times* had three reports of various lengths that contained the keywords “China” and “bird flu”, but only one had substantial coverage on the nation’s flu situation, which briefly reported China’s second human death of the virus (China: second bird flu death, 2005, November 24).

### *Chemical spill*

The last appearance of the keyword “bird flu” in *Times* for the month was on November 26, in a news story about the chemical spill incident in the northern city of Harbin. In this story titled “Spill in China brings danger, and cover-up”, the author reported on how municipal officials of Harbin tried to conceal the news that the city water supply had been contaminated by an upriver chemical spill (Yardley, 2006, November 26). Instead, the government announced there would be a shut down of the city water supply for routine maintenance on the pipes. Though the local government soon revealed the contamination news, the damage to its credibility was already done, as stated in the article (Yardley, 2006, November 26).

As a public health scandal happened amid bird flu outbreaks, it is not a surprise to see the reporting of the water contamination had been heavily linked to bird flu. *Times* took an obvious criticizing tone in its coverage of the contamination case; it depicted the incident as a major public confidence crisis and a bad case of government cover-up. For its accusation about Chinese authority’s credibility issue, nothing else came handier than bird flu and SARS as two types of evidence to testify to it. “The rumors,” as the article went, “are just one of the consequences of a government response that appeared secretive and misleading at a time when China is eager to prove to the outside world that it is a candid partner on issues like containing bird flu” (Yardley, 2006, November 26). On SARS, the article referred to the sharp criticisms that China received for covering-up the outbreak. Although the article also put some remarks on the “growing praise” that the government received from international societies for “being more open and responsive”

about outbreaks like bird flu, it went on stating that scientists were still suspicious of China's low number of reported infection cases, therefore hinting possible cover-up from the government (Yardley, 2006, November 26).

***December 2005 coverage:***

*The Times* and *Post* had 12 and three bird flu news in December, 2005 respectively.

In a clear contrast to the extensive coverage in the previous month, *Post* seemed to be lacking coverage on China's bird flu news in December. On December 7 and 10, the *Post* reported the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> human infection cases in China in its international news section (World in brief, 2005, December 7; World in brief, 2005, December 10). Then for twenty days, *Post* didn't have any bird flu news. The coverage was resumed on December 30 as the newspaper reported China's third confirmed human death from the disease (World in brief, 2005, December 30). Published in the international news brief section, all three pieces were brief and plainly informational. The *Post's* lack of coverage of bird flu news in December was shown not only by its small numbers of reports, but also by its failure to even mention the sixth human infection case discovered in China in the month, which was, in contrast, promptly covered by *The Times*.

In comparison to the *Post's* lack of coverage of the bird flu news, *Times* covered the disease more often and with more extensive detail. In December, *Times* covered the bird flu situation in China in seven stories of various lengths.

In the first report of bird flu news of the month, the *Times* once again challenged China's integrity in its fight against the disease. Titled "Experts doubt bird flu tallies from China and elsewhere" (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2), the report focused on China's

outbreak statistic. Using China's plan to vaccinate its 14.2 billion domestic birds as an evidence of the severity of outbreaks in the country, the newspaper said experts had long been "mystified" by the unproportionate low number of human cases that were being reported (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). Amid the "mystery" of China's low human case number, the news once again brought up the case of China's mishandling of SARS to validate its suspicion. It criticized China for keeping the outbreak of SARS as a "state secret" that "helped it spread throughout the nation and beyond" (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). Although the article briefly admitted the government had become more open about health statistics afterward, it quickly followed the positive comment with more criticizing remarks, such as "the penchant for secrecy remains" (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). In the article, China was also described to have an insufficient public health infrastructure "with little expertise or capacity" to provide accurate outbreak information in a timely fashion, resulting misdiagnoses and unreported cases (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). China's lack of openness and health infrastructure were two dominant and repetitive themes framed throughout the article. This in turn nurtured the article's assumption that the country's low numbers of human cases were caused by officials' attempts to cover up or by the system's failure to detect any, leaving the possibility that China's low number of human cases could reflect other realities, such as an effective national hygienic campaign unmentioned. Vietnam, which was also covered in the article, received more positive frames from the newspaper. The article praised Vietnam for its prompt situation updates and open information channels, and this was a sharp contrast to its coverage on outbreaks in China which described disease news there as "slow to

emerge on the state media” (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). Although in fact Vietnam faced even more severe outbreaks than China, apparently the country did receive more positive news frames compared to China. This more positive news framing on Vietnam than China may only be a single case, but it shows some consistency with other studies on *New York Time’s* reporting on SARS in China and Vietnam, which indicated Vietnam received more positive frames in that crisis than China did (Huang & Leung, 2005).

The *Times’* second bird flu story appeared on the same day (December 2) and dissected the flu outbreaks from a more macro point of view. Like a similar story carried out by *Post* in November, *Times’* news followed a small vaccine team for one day as they vaccinated chicken flocks in a remote village in China (French, 2005, December 2). Some repeated frames can be found in the story, such as China’s sheer number of flocks, backyard chicken farms, vaccine shortage and fake vaccines, and poverty in rural areas. Noticeably in this article (French, 2005, December 2), China was named the “traditional incubator of bird flu” for the first time. The country’s “credibility” was pointed out as a major issue it faced in the bird flu crisis. Once again, the flu outbreak was linked to the SARS cover-up in 2003, which the newspaper said “badly tarnished” China’s credibility (French, 2005, December 2). As the news went further in this tone of criticism, it continued to question the low numbers of death in China and suspected that “dozens or maybe even hundreds may have died here already” (French, 2005, December 2). Returning to the story of the vaccination team, the article focused on the unprofessionalism of the vaccination workers, describing them as untrained people, wearing only ordinary cloths with no protection gear who “failed to take even the most

basic hygienic precaution” (French, 2005, December 2). Like the previous *Post* article on the same topic (vaccination team), the article wrapped up with pessimistic conclusions, doubting not only the credibility but also the capability of the country to carry out a campaign of such a gigantic scale (French, 2005, December 2).

To actively evaluate China’s moral position in the fight against bird flu took up a major part of both *Post* and *Times*’ coverage. For example, on December 7, *Times* reported China’s latest human case. In the article, the SARS epidemic and the “initial secrecy the authorities used” to handle the outbreak were mentioned in a more positive way to compare it to the nation’s efforts to mount “an aggressive campaign to fight repeated bird flu epidemics in poultry” (Fourth case of bird flu reported in China, 2005, December 7). The article also tried to provide advice on the bird flu problems by quoting W.H.O. official, saying “China’s public still need to be taught how to spot early signs of bird flu in poultry to prevent a spread of the disease among birds and people” (Fourth case of bird flu reported in China, 2005, December 7).

On December 16, *Times* reported China’s sixth human infection case. After the government announced that the nation had no new outbreaks for straight 16 days, the report called the new case a “setback for official efforts to contain the disease” (China reports 6<sup>th</sup> human case of bird flu, 2005, December 16).

From December 17 to 31, *Times*’ coverage on the disease was reduced to only two news stories, as no new outbreaks occurred in China during this period. A story appeared on December 30 on China’s announcing of the third human death from the disease (China: third human death, 2005, December 30) and one the next day on China refusing to send

virus samples to W.H.O. (W.H.O. says China not sharing samples, 2005, December 31). The first of the two was brief news story about the latest death case. The second one, which was also the last bird flu news in December from *Times*, criticized China for not sharing samples of bird flu virus to W.H.O.—the international organization that played a major role in spurring China to disclose information in both SARS and bird flu outbreaks (China: third human death, 2005, December 30). “It means that there is a question mark that hangs over the progress of the virus in China,” the news commented, blaming China’s holding back of information had hindered the efforts from the international society to help the nation (W.H.O. says China not sharing samples, 2005, December 31).

***January 2006 coverage:***

The news reports in the first month of 2006 witnessed a major shift of attention from China and Southeast Asia to Turkey as human death suddenly erupted in that country (e.g., Rosenthal, 2006, January 6). *The Times*’ first four bird flu news reports in January was direct coverage on the flu outbreaks and the human death cases in Turkey. The new cases discovered in Turkey were the first cases reported outside China and the Southeast Asia (Rosenthal, 2006, January 6). To date, the disease had infected about 140 people in Asia and about half of them had died (Rosenthal, 2006, January 6). As the deadly disease moved westward and now crept up on the doorsteps of Europe, news media’s attention began to focus on the question of how long Turkey could hold the spreading of the disease and when and where the virus would land in Europe. China, on the other hand, began to receive a gradually decreased media attention even as it still reported new outbreaks and human cases. The announcement of the eighth human



infection case (Rosenthal, 2006, January 10) and two new deaths from the disease (Rosenthal, 2006, January 12), for example, only received brief mention by *Times*.

However, as attention may have shifted to other nations, it is evident that China still frequently appeared in bird flu news as a keyword—often described as an example of a government failing to contain the disease and lacking transparency. For example, on December 6, *Times* had a story on Turkey’s sudden increase of bird flu outbreaks (Rosenthal, 2006, January 6). In an independent part about the bird flu situation in China, the news criticized China for its “lack of expertise to detect the disease and may be reluctant to report it because its devastating effects on the incomes of farmers” (Rosenthal, 2006, January 6). In another report three days later, Turkey’s sudden burst of outbreaks were described as a “surprise” as they happened “in a relatively well-off country” where “it is not the norm for humans and animals to live under one roof” (Rosenthal, 2006, January 9). The article continued to indicate the practice as common in China and Southeast Asian nations (Rosenthal, 2006, January 9). As other examples will also show, man-and-chicken-under-one-roof is a news frame that *Times* had constantly associated with China in its bird flu news. This news frame has been used to build an image of China’s impoverished villages with poor living standards and unhealthy rural practices, which only caused the virus “running rampant for years” in the country (Rosenthal, 2006, January 9).

Some Chinese traditional practices were constantly challenged in the news, which also rendered a pessimistic image of China’s problematic public health system. *Times*’ report on January 14 by Howard French was constructed around a story of a peasant

family who tried to treat a family member's severe disease despite their miserable financial situation (French, 2006, January 14). The economic boom in China did not bring benefit to the peasants, the author claimed. The failure of the government to provide peasants with "any" health care reinforced the portrait of China as two separate nations: "one urban and increasingly comfortable, the other rural and increasingly miserable" (French, 2006, January 14). The Chinese government was described as showing no interest in bringing to peasants basic health care and turning a blind eye on their suffering. The total absence of health care in the countryside, the author commented, had both sown deep resentment among people and helped spread diseases, both of which "make the country—and the world—more vulnerable to epidemics like SARS, and possibly bird flu" (French, 2006, January 14).

From January 15 to 18, *Times* had four reports, one piece a day, on the latest development of bird flu around the globe. These four stories combined news of outbreaks in Laos (Bradsher, 2006, January 15) and Turkey (Rosenthal, 2006, January 17) and the upcoming international conference on bird flu in Beijing (Bradsher, 2006, January 18). The keyword "China" was found in all four reports but none of which carried significant coverage on the outbreak situation in the country. On January 19, *Times* had a medium-length report on the bird flu conference that was held in Beijing (Bradsher, 2006, January 19). It reported the pledges made by the wealthy nations to help poor countries to fight the disease (Bradsher, 2006, January 19). China's role in this global effort was a major part of the story with two themes addressed—challenge and honesty. Referring to governmental and international officials, the newspaper stated the

nation “faced a serious challenge from bird flu” for it has a third of the world’s bird population (Bradsher, 2006, January 19). On China’s honesty issue, the news showed a mixture of both positive and negative comments. It praised China for hosting the conference, saying “China’s willingness to stage the conference showed it had accepted responsibility for fighting the disease” (Bradsher, 2006, January 19). The newspaper then followed the positive comments with its usual criticizing tone. SARS was used once again as a rationale: “China concealed the first outbreaks of SARS...for four months, until the disease had spread to Hong Kong and around the world” (Bradsher, 2006, January 19). To suggest China had been doing the same covering-up in the bird flu crisis, the news pointed out “China also waited until last November to acknowledge for the first time that it had at least three human cases of bird flu” (Bradsher, 2006, January 19), therefore suggesting China may have unrevealed human death well before that.

*Times’* last Chinese bird flu news in the month came on January 26. It briefly reported China’s seventh human death to bird flu; the case caused W.H.O. great suspicion because “no outbreaks in poultry had been confirmed in the area where he [the man who died] lived” (World briefing Asia, 2006, January 26).

In January, *Post* had three news reports about the bird flu situation in China. On January 12, *Post* had a long report on China’s two new death cases from bird flu. Titled “After W.H.O. request, China reports two more bird flu deaths” (Cody, 2006, January 12), the report criticized China’s delay of informing international society about the latest flu development. Though the report admitted there was no evidence of governmental cover-up, it noted that the delayed reports fed concerns about the “reliability of official

information on the extent of bird flu among China's 1.3 billion residents" (Cody, 2006, January 12). On January 13, another report briefly mentioned the world conference on bird flu that would be held in Beijing for the next week (Washington in brief, 2006, January 13). On January 19, *Post* reported on the Beijing conference on bird flu in which wealthy nations promised to donate \$2 billion to combat the disease (World in brief, 2006, January 19).

As large-scale bird flu outbreaks began to decline in China, both newspapers' attention shifted to other hot spots in Asia, Europe and Africa where new cases began to emerge. This trend continued into the news coverage from both newspapers in February.

***February 2006 coverage:***

*Post* had three reports that contained the keywords "bird flu" and "China" in February. The newspaper's interest in the bird flu news in the month had shifted from reporting infection and death cases in China to the nation's role in international poultry trade and its alleged impact to the spread of the disease. The news on February 2<sup>nd</sup> was about the authority of Hong Kong finding a dead bird that had been smuggled into the region from China mainland and which tested positive for the deadly virus (World in brief, February 2, 2006). Two weeks later, another report of Nigeria's outbreaks also accused China's illegal poultry exporter had brought the deadly disease to Africa. Titled "Poultry, not wild bird, most often carries deadly avian flu to Africa", the report says Nigeria imports more than a million chickens a year from China, where "the virus has circulated for a decade" (World in brief, February 2, 2006). The article suggested more attention should be given to illegal commerce of poultry, especially the smuggling of

contaminated birds from China (World in brief, February 2, 2006). As the third news article concerning world poultry trade in the month, *Post* reported on February 27 that China was banning poultry imports from France where the disease recently emerged; no comments were made on the issue of China's poultry exportation (World in brief, 2006, February 27).

Like the *Post*, *Times*' bird flu coverage in February also reflected a divergence of attention. As more attention was diverted to European and African nations where bird flu emerged suddenly, reporting on China was both reduced in quantity and focused intensively on the issue of cross-border poultry trade. On February 2, *Times*' first bird flu news of the month reported the dead pet birds in Hong Kong, which were alleged to be smuggled from the mainland China (Bradsher, 2006, February 2). Unlike the brief one-sentence coverage of the accident that was also carried out by the *Post*, *Times*' report was more detailed, packed with significant causal interpretation and moral judgments. Despite China pledged to deal with bird flu squarely, the newspaper concentrated on the possible cover-up that may have lead to the recent Hong Kong case. Because the infectious birds were originally from Guangdong, a province where local officials deny any outbreaks of the disease, the newspapers raised the question of whether the provincial officials "are concealing the true extent of the disease" (Bradsher, February 2, 2006). As there had been no solid evidence of the local government engaged in cover-up, the article turned to SARS, which was said to also originate from the province, to support its argument, saying local government's concealment of the disease may be repeated in the bird flu crisis (Bradsher, February 2, 2006). On February 11, *Times* reported the eighth death case

in China in its news brief (World briefing Asia, February 11, 2006).

In February, the newspaper's attention on bird flu had diverted from China to the new emerging breeding ground of the disease: Africa and Europe. The remaining reports of the month were exclusively about the disease development in nations such as Nigeria (News summary, 2006, February 9), Italy, Greece and Bulgaria (Rosenthal, 2006, February 12). China was found in these news reports mostly being described as the original breeding ground of the virus, though none of the news mentioned any scientific evidence to prove this allegation.

***March 2006 coverage:***

*The Times'* bird flu coverage in March 2006 could be put into three general categories: news briefs of bird flu cases in China, briefs of news in other nations and stories on the new developments in disease treatment.

On March 4<sup>th</sup>, *Times* had a brief report on China's announcing its latest possible death case (Bradsher, 2006, March 4), and the cause of the patient's death was later confirmed on March 9 (China: 10<sup>th</sup> human death from bird flu). Since the patient died in Guangdong, the province "which concealed the emergence of the SARS virus for four months", the report suggested the local government may have concealed outbreaks of bird flu that had lead to the latest death (China: 10<sup>th</sup> human death from bird flu). On 25 March, the 15<sup>th</sup> bird flu case in China was reported in the news brief section (Human bird flu death in Shanghai confirmed). China's SARS cover-up scandal was also mentioned in two other separate reports during the month. On March 21, in a news report on the global communication of the bird flu information, Beijing was accused of lying about the

existence of the early cases of SARS, causing the disease to spread all over the world in months (Altman, 2006, March 21). Likewise on March 26, China was again used as an example of nations “concealing cases and refusing entry to international disease detectives” in news of the latest treatment development (McNeil, 2006, March 26).

As a continuation of February’s news coverage, bird flu news in March put more attention on recent outbreaks in European nations. But China was still frequently mentioned in these articles as where bird flu had originated. Such examples included news on March 6 (Rosenthal), March 26 (McNeil) and on March 28 (Rosenthal). Take the report on March 6 for example. The news cited the latest research findings that showed the virus originally broke out in Southeast Asia and then was introduced to China (Rosenthal, 2006, March 6). However, in a separate section, it continued to refer to China as the origin of the disease, saying the virus left its original breeding ground in China and “promptly moved into dozens of locations in Europe and Africa” (Rosenthal, 2006, March 6). Although this might have been referring to a suggested possible transmission route from Asia to other continents, it reconfirmed the impression of China being the origin of the disease. As later news will also show, China as the origin of the disease, though never being scientifically proved, was inherently emphasized in both newspapers’ bird flu coverage.

A third category of bird flu news is reports of other related development. For example, on March 9, *Times* had an article in its business/financial section about the fast food chain KFC’s sales slippage in China and France that was caused by people’s fear of the disease (Tagliabue, 2006, March 9). Another report in the latter part of the month

(also in the business/financial section) suggested that two antiviral drugs should be banned for treating bird flu because the excessive use of them in China had caused the raise of a drug-resistant strain of the virus (Agency proposes ban on flu drugs for poultry, 2006, March 21).

Reporting of bird flu from *Post* in March also showed a clear shift of attention. More attention was given to the new outbreaks in various European and African countries. Asian countries, including China, seemed to receive decreased interest in the news as a result. Also, as the disease hopscotched from Asia to Europe and Africa, speculation of when the disease would land in America began to emerge in the news.

The *Post's* bird flu news in March was dominated by the disease's new development across Europe. Although mostly brief, the newspaper had reported a series of bird flu outbreaks in Germany (World in brief, 2006, March 1), Poland (Bird flu pushes through Europe, hit swan in Poland, 2006, March 7), Austria (World in brief, 2006, March 8), Sweden (World in brief, 2006, March 16) and other nations like Cameroon (World in brief, 2006, March 13) and Azerbaijan (World in brief, 2006, March 14). China, on the other hand, received little attention. Even its ninth and tenth deaths caused by the disease received only brief mention in news (Bird flu pushes through Europe, hit swan in Poland, 2006, March 7; Bird flu seen reaching U.S. within a year, 2006, March 9).

A new development of bird flu news in the month was the emerging discussion of America and bird flu. As the disease moved westward from Asia to Europe, news articles began to talk about the possibility that the disease would land in America soon. Such examples included the article on March 9 that predicted bird flu "to jump across the



Atlantic Ocean to the Americas within a year” (Bird flu seen reaching U.S. within a year, 2006, March 9). Once again, the possibility of the H5N1 virus to mutate into a form that can spread among people and result in millions of deaths was reiterated at the end of the article (Bird flu seen reaching U.S. within a year, 2006, March 9). Another news article during the month talked about some new bird flu gadgets (including bird flu poultry timers and smart touchless trash cans) that U.S. manufacturers pitched to American consumers and depicted the fact that the virus “has not been found in the United States” (Koncius, 2006, March 30).

***April 2006 coverage:***

In April, both *Post* and *Times* had only one report each on the bird flu issue in China—a sharp decrease from previous months even considering the factor that media attention regarding bird flu had moved away from the country. Instead of evidence of the disease’s declining impact in China, this decrease in numbers of reports was more likely caused by the migration of the disease and the shifting media attention as a result. The *Post*’s only brief bird flu news in April called the spreading of the disease a “really serious global situation,” which “has spread at lightening speed in the past three months, infecting birds in 30 new countries” in Africa, Europe and the Middle East (World in brief, 2006, April 5). In comparison, *Times*’ only news piece about bird flu and China in April was significantly longer. Continuing its focus on transnational poultry trade, the news article described how live chickens and other poultry products were smuggled from China to Italy, Nigeria and Vietnam (Rosenthal, 2006, April, 15). The article identified the illegal transportation of poultry products from China as the cause of the introduction

of the deadly virus into the countries.

***May 2006 coverage:***

In May, both newspapers' reporting on bird flu showed a mixed theme of optimism and doubt. *Times* on May 14, wrote about some positive signs of bird flu's retreat from the world (McNeil, 2006, May 14). Titled "Avian flu wanes in Asian nations it first hit hard," the article listed evidence that suggested the virus's decline in Vietnam and Thailand (McNeil, 2006, May 14). About China, where it assumed the virus originated, the article showed a reserved optimism. Citing its sharply decreased numbers of poultry and human cases, the article stated China "has turned the corner". The news, however, also expressed doubt on the latest progress in the country, stating the fake flu vaccine and chicken smuggling across the borders were still "rampant" (McNeil, 2006, May 14). The country's credibility was also put on the line as the news referred to China's mishandling of SARS. The progress China made in fighting bird flu was doubted because "international officials tend to greet official public health reports from China skeptically, in part because it concealed the outbreak of the SARS virus there for months" (McNeil, 2006, May 14).

One highlight of *Times*' bird flu coverage in May was its report on the new made-for-TV movie *Fatal Contact: Bird flu in America* shown on ABC. The science fiction movie depicted a grim picture about a mutated and more lethal bird flu virus from China that reached the United States and killed millions of people, which had been generally criticized as unrealistic and over-dramatized (McNeil, 2006, May 9).

*Post* had six reports on bird flu in May, of which two mentioned China briefly. One

of the articles was about the movie *Fatal Contact*, in which China became the brewing ground for a mutated super lethal bird flu virus (Shales, 2006, May 9). Another article in the financial section discussed how American business should prepare for a possible bird flu pandemic in the country (Brown, 2006, May, 2). It said companies that have large “footprints” in Asia, especially in China, should learn lessons from examples like SARS and be more prepared for future pandemics (Brown, 2006, May, 2).

### ***June, July and beyond***

Despite the steady decrease of outbreaks among poultry and disappearance of human cases in the past two months, the coverage of China’s bird flu situation rebounded in June 2006 as a result of the discovery of China’s first human death from the disease in 2003—two years earlier than the nation’s admitted first case in November 2005 (China had bird flu case in ‘03, 2006, June 22). The death was originally diagnosed as caused by SARS, which had hit the country hard in the year (China had bird flu case in ‘03, 2006, June 22). *Times*’ two reports on the accident described it as a medical misdiagnosis (China had bird flu case in ‘03, 2006, June 22) that needed verification (China test bird flu case, 2006, June 30). The *Post*’s reports about the same matter, on the other hand, described it as a possible cover-up scheme by the government, saying the case “reinforces suspicions that there were more-and-earlier human bird flu cases in China than Beijing has admitted” (Findings, 2006, June 22). To add more dramatic twist to the case, another news article from *Post* reported that one of the Chinese scientists who made the discovery had asked the *New England Journal of Medicine* to withdraw the finding from the journal and later denied having made such a request (Findings, 2006, June 24).

As the misdiagnosis of China's first human bird flu case caught two newspapers' attention for a while, the vanishing of bird flu in the country and the development of the disease in other parts of the world finally moved their interests away from the issue in China. In July, the last month in the study, neither newspaper had a report on China's bird flu situation. The misdiagnosis case that was revealed in June was confirmed by the Chinese government in early August and received brief mention in both newspapers (World in brief, 2006, August 9; China: ministry confirms first bird flu death in 2003, August 9).

#### **A framing review of the news reports**

Bird flu news in both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* appeared in various sections of the newspapers, spanning from international news and financial sections to life style, book review and even TV drama guide. Of the 76 news articles included in the study, 62 appeared on the international news columns, nine were from financial news sectors and five from others, such as life style, book review, entertainment and TV drama guide. The attention this "would-be" world pandemic received from both newspapers is undisputed. At the peak of the bird flu outbreaks in China, news of the disease situation was updated on a daily basis, providing some most crucial information for concerned readers to grasp the latest flu development. As with two sides of a coin, while media attention to the public health problem was gained, fears were also spread among the public. Although media effects on their audiences are hard to measure and would take a whole new study to analyze, this study aimed to explore the news articles collected in the study to construct a functional set of news frames through which the bird

flu news provide certain problem definitions, causal explanations, moral evaluation and possible solutions. Using Entman's four functions of news frames, the following discussion describes the major frames found in the text of the news articles.

### **Defining the bird flu problem**

In order to answer the first research question of this study, which is how did *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* frame the bird flu in China as a health, political and social crisis, this section will analyze how the news materials from both newspapers defined the bird flu problem.

Bird flu is not only a public health issue; it has been given layers of social, cultural and political meanings from the newspaper's news frames. Therefore, to accommodate this variety of meanings, a single definition of this complicated global phenomenon is just not adequate. This is evident in both *Post* and *Times*' coverage of the disease. Different news articles tried to cover bird flu from different perspectives and came up with news that wrap the disease with layers upon layers of political, social and cultural meaning, beyond the basic news that the virus broke out and killed people. Specific themes embedded in news frames included the lethality of the H5N1 virus and the bird flu as a Chinese disease.

#### *Framing the lethality of the H5N1 virus/bird flu disease*

If we can imagine the news framing on bird flu as an onion, at its core should be media's definition of the lethality of the H5N1 virus. It is safe to argue that an essential reason for bird flu to attract global attention is its obvious lethality, both *de facto* and potential. The virus has been known for causing high death rates among its hosts, animals

and people alike (Stöhr & Esveld, 2004). But still, the relatively small number of people it killed did not live up to the man-killer title it earned from the news media. Bird flu kills, but it could be argued here that the world gets to know the disease as a man-killer largely thanks to media's portrayal of it as a lethal disease that has a potential to mutate and kill us all. This definition of bird flu's potential lethality was vividly described in a *Post* article that read:

You can't pick up a newspaper without seeing a story about the possible plague of bird flu. Millions could die, the stories say. Or tens of millions. Or hundreds of millions...Every article about this flu has a boilerplate paragraph, as if mandated by law, stating that scientists fear the virus will mutate, become highly contagious in humans, and create a pandemic that will rival the catastrophe of the Spanish influenza of 1918 (Achenbach, 2005, December 11).

A “boilerplate paragraph” of bird flu's deadly potential, as described by this *Post* article, is most often seen in both *newspapers'* coverage of the disease. Although the disease killed less than 1,000 people worldwide—far less than the scores of other “regular” diseases such as diarrhea and seasonal flu during the same time period (AP, 2006, January 9)—news reports from both the *Times* and *Post* never hesitated to pitch a kind of doom's day scenario of a mutated bird flu virus, a scenario which has led to the accusation of these news media being alarmist about the deadliness of the disease (McNeil, 2006, March 26).

*Framing bird flu as a Chinese disease*

Beyond the definition of the lethality at its core, bird flu was also most commonly defined as a Chinese problem. News reports from both *Times* and *Post* repeatedly pointed to China as the original breeding ground of bird flu, even though there had never been substantial evidence to prove so. On the contrary, Vietnam, which was the first country in Asia to report massive bird flu infection and human deaths in early 2003 (far earlier than China's first reports) received less suspicion as the origin of the disease (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). Although this study does not intend to make an argument to support or refute any hypothesis on the virus' origin, it found the way the two newspapers defined bird flu as a deadly disease out of China to be fairly unscientific and unbalanced. Because both newspapers had been marking China as the origin of the disease, treating this hypothesis as a fact, they continued to do so even after increasing evidence showed the virus was more likely to begin in Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam (Rosenthal, 2006, March 6).

By tracing the news reports in the study, a gradual expansion of the bird flu definition in terms of geographical regions could be found. As the disease broke out in Southeast Asian countries and in China, the disease was introduced in the news as a Chinese/Southeast Asian problem. As times moved forward, the disease migrated to central Asia (Turkey), Africa (Nigeria, etc.) and then to European nations such as Italy and Greece, and news reports pointed out that people realized bird flu was "no longer an Asian problem" (Brown, 2005, November 7) and African nations were of "particular concern" for their problematic public health system (More Bird Flu Is Reported in Asia, 2005, November 4).

Although during the framing of bird flu, the “globalness” as a character of the disease had been mentioned from time to time, the effort to define the problem as a regional issue divided by geographical boundaries was found at the core of the definition of bird flu in both newspapers’ coverage.

This definition of the disease from a local/regional issue to a global one is also accompanied by defining the same issue as from the economic south to the economic north. As the disease moved up from poor Asian and African nations to richer European nations as a result of the natural bird migration routes and, more importantly, human commerce, the news critics of the outbreak development were seen to be less harsh and more focused on the “victim” side of the story—that is, nations suffered an introduced disease that was either carried by migrating birds or by products from Asia. Also, while the newspapers had an almost unified framing of the Asian and African nation with non-existing health facilities, chickens and farmers live under one roof, and local people intend to cover up outbreaks in the fear of economic impact, the richer European nations, such as Italy and Greece, were described as “models” in early disease detection and prevention (Rosenthal, 2006, February 12). The result is a common framing pattern in which rich countries receive instant applause for their prevention measures while poor nations are doubted in their capability and honesty in dealing with the disease.

Both newspapers tried to define bird flu as a global issue in the sense that the lethal virus nowadays could reach any corner of the world in days and affect anybody. But in reality this definition of “globalness” of bird flu was carried out in a way hardly more than to frame the disease as a problem certain countries or regions (China/Asian countries



or poor countries in general) introduced to the world and how “international society”, represented by wealthy nations and dominantly western international organizations, responded to the crisis and helped to solve the problem.

### **Causal explanation for the bird flu**

The interpretation function of the bird flu frames is most commonly displayed in the news articles’ portrayal of China’s poor health condition and problematic handling of the outbreaks—two aspects that were used to rationalize the wide spread of the disease and to justify the criticism that the country received. China’s poor health conditions in rural areas was a scene most frequently rendered in both newspapers’ bird flu coverage. An image of the poverty-stricken countryside was commonly linked to other aspects such as poor living conditions (e.g., muddy roads, shabby houses), unhealthy traditional practices (e.g., animal and people living under the same roof, children keeping birds as pets, people eating sick birds and improper disposal of dead animals) and poor public health conditions (e.g., heavily polluted environment, peasants have no or can’t afford proper health support). These stereotyped images were commonly seen in the bird flu news from both newspapers. As the framing of China’s rural health conditions contributed to the image making of the nation as an incubator of the deadly disease. Its urban environment, on the other hand, received no better news frames from both newspapers. China’s urban environment was often described as an extension and continuation of the existing rural health problems but with even more challenges. For example, a *Times* article about bird flu’s potential to be widespread in urban environments gave a fairly grim account of China’s urban health conditions, suggesting “urbanized peasants have brought their

traditional livestock practices into overcrowded shantytowns that lie cheek-by-fowl with Western-style industrial chicken farms, whose owners have a strong incentive to hide bird flu outbreaks among their flocks” (Goozner, 2005, November 23).

A second most common set of interpretations is the government’s handling of the disease. Reporting Chinese government’s response to the disease contained a significant part of both newspapers’ bird flu coverage. This type of coverage usually includes three kinds of news: the government announcing bird flu outbreaks and human cases, the government reacting to counter the disease (e.g., nation-wide vaccination campaign, massive culling, holding international conference on disease prevention, etc.) and the government’s mishandling of the disease (e.g., holding back information, promoting improper treatment and failing to stop the disease). In explaining China’s bird flu issue, the government’s mishandling of the disease was frequently listed, along with the problematic health environmental frame, as the cause of the nation’s continuous outbreaks. The framing of the government’s failure as an explanation for flu outbreaks usually involves both local authorities and the central government. A common pattern includes local officials trying to hide the extent of the epidemic to protect local economies and secure personal political future (Yardley, 2005, November 26) and the communist central government has a secretive nature that prevents negative news from being exposed (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). Examples in the news show the Chinese government was also described as slow to react to outbreaks and reluctant to cooperate with international organizations (such as W.H.O.) in dealing with the crisis (W.H.O. says China not sharing samples, 2005, December 31).

### **Moral evaluation**

To morally evaluate the bird flu situation is a third inseparable part of both *Times* and *Post's* bird flu coverage. Through the review of the news articles under study, a mixture of both positive and negative moral evaluation toward China's bird flu situation could be found. China as a nation was put under the spotlight; it was dissected in the process to rationalize the development of the whole situation and to make moral judgment accordingly. As the reporting of bird flu encompassed a variety of social, cultural, economic and political aspects of China, it could be argued here that the moral judgment the nation received in this process would also be diversified.

The Chinese authority's roles in this national health crisis were frequently highlighted in news reports. News reports from both *Times* and *Post* treated the Chinese government with multi-faceted moral frames ranging from the deadpan announcer of outbreak information to outright liar that tried to hide outbreak news. A mixed pattern of moral critics of the government could be found here. Most brief bird flu news contained little moral frames as they mainly focused on basic information about disease development, but when they did, they tended to be on the criticizing side. Mixed moral evaluation was more often found in longer stories about the disease. News reports sometimes gave credit to the government's effort to check the disease and to improve communication of information (Bradsher, 2006, January 19); but in more cases than not, positive comments were followed and overwhelmed by dominant negative frames like suspicion of cover-up and criticism of government's failure to stop the spreading of the disease.

*Framing China's "secret" handling of SARS*

Portrayal of China as a country of secrecy is a common frame found in both newspapers' bird flu reports. Though both newspapers admitted the Chinese government had been more open in the bird flu crisis and found no concrete evidence of cover-up, both frequently referred to China's mishandling of SARS in their bird flu coverage (Bradsher, 2005, November 17; Cody, 2005 November 16; Rosenthal, 2005, December 2). The framing of SARS in bird flu news was mainly constructed with two patterns. SARS was first suggested as a lesson that the Chinese government had learned from. *Time's* article on November 17, 2005 (Bradsher), for example, stated China's admission of human bird flu cases marked a "far-reaching" contrast with its practice in the SARS crisis during which officials concealed the news of the disease for months. Saying the government was more open in bird flu outbreaks, the article suggested China had learned its lesson from SARS.

A second and more dominant pattern, however, was to frame SARS as a symbol of China's ethical problem, and to suggest the government's cover-up in SARS would foreshadow its secrecy in the bird flu crisis. The report by *Post* on November 16, 2005 (Cody) said the international society was greatly concerned about the Chinese government's handling of bird flu because of the bad example it set in SARS, saying the government's concealment in SARS created distrust internationally. Other news examples also show SARS being portrayed as a "state secret" (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2), which "badly tarnished" China's credibility (French, 2005, December 2) and a big "question mark" on China's honesty to deal with bird flu squarely (W.H.O. says China

not sharing samples, 2005, December 31).

Bird flu and SARS together were also employed as testimony to the nations' ethical issue in other news coverage of China. Previous example showed that both bird flu and SARS were used to exemplify the government's inclination towards secrecy in crises such as the cover-up of water contamination in northern city of Harbin (Yardley, 2006, November 26); similar moral framing on both diseases also appeared in a report about China's withering public health system in countryside (French, 2006, January 14).

*China's Communist sticker*

The ideological aspect of both *Times* and the *Post's* news on bird flu news in China is also evident. As impressive as China's economic achievement in the past 20 years is, it has had a turbulent political and social history in the past five decades. Often the two periods—historical and current—were put together to create a sharp contrast of China's past vs. today or to remind readers of the evolution of the nation's ideological identity.

Consider *Times'* report on China's withering rural public health system for example (French, 2006, January 14). In contrast to the current next-to-zero health care in the countryside, the news praised the "socialized medical system" in the 1970s that worked "public health wonders" before the economic reform. "Paradoxically," as the article remarked, China's move away from the socialist plan economy both boosted its boom towns and inseparably caused the dissolution of the nation's collective public health system (French, 2006, January 14). Although China's ideological history had not been a major focus in both newspapers' bird flu coverage, this study still found other remarks that reminded readers of China's Communist sticker. Such an example may include the

remarks made in a *Post* article that stated [the massive vaccination campaign] “evoked images of the all-out campaigns of the past, when all of China seemed to be swatting flies during an infestation in the 1960s, for instance, or when millions built miniature steel ovens in their back yards in response to an appeal from Mao Zedong,” which ridiculed the government’s decision to carry out a campaign of such a scale (Cody, 2005, November 20).

Moving from China’s ideological past to more recent times, both newspapers also frequently referred to China’s ideological characteristics in their bird flu coverage. For example, in the same *Post* article about China’s vaccination plan, it praised the Communist Party for its effectiveness in mobilizing a massive national campaign, saying “the Communist Party’s tight organization at every level of the country’s administration has long been an effective tool for handing down orders” (Cody, 2005, November 20). Despite this example of benign framing of Beijing, a significant part of both newspapers’ framing of the political and ideological sphere of bird flu was seen to be on the negative side. More often than not, the Chinese government was portrayed as a government that tried to keep SARS (and bird flu as well) a secret (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2), as a fractured political structure with rampant local officialdoms that forbid bad news being reported (Cody, 2006, January 12) and as a government that was unable to improve the economy and provide adequate health care in the countryside (French, 2006, January 14). For example, in a *Times* article about China’s economic growth titled “That blur? It’s China, moving up in the pack” (Barboza & Altman, 2005 December 20), the authors listed drawbacks of China despite its recent high-speed economic growth. Among them is

China's inclination towards secrecy, which often involves, according to the authors, local authorities trying to "limit any embarrassment, as the delays in reporting bird flu cases and the chemical spill in Jilin have shown" (Barboza & Altman, 2005, December 20). In another *Times*' article, the near total absence of health care in the countryside was said to have "reinforced the idea of China as two separate nations: one urban and increasingly comfortable, the other rural and increasingly miserable" and helped sow "deep resentment among the peasantry while helping to spread diseases...making the country—and the world—more vulnerable to epidemics like SARS, and possibly bird flu" (French, 2006, January 14).

### **Possible solutions**

As the last main function of bird flu news frames, both newspapers recommended solutions to the flu crisis in China. Among them are repeated demands for the governments to be more transparent and efficient about flu statistics (Rosenthal, 2005, December 2), to be more determined to stop virus transmission in the country and to other nations (Rosenthal, 2006, April, 15) and to be more cooperative with various governments and international organizations (Cody, 2006, January 12). For example, on reporting China's confirmation of its first human bird flu cases, *Times* wrote on how the Beijing central government went around reluctant local officials and asked W.H.O. to send international inspectors to investigate the cases (Bradsher, 2005, November 17). Describing this as "exactly" what China needed to do, the news article also prescribed resolution to the outbreaks by saying that countries infected with the disease "should be transparent; [they] should report early" (Bradsher, 2005, November 17).

Noticeably, on reporting the same cases, *Post* also highlighted the role of international organizations like W.H.O. in its coverage. Referring to officials from the organization, the news stressed the importance of “swift detection of human infections” and how countries should “seek to contain the disease locally at the first sign” to “prevent a global outbreak” (Cody, 2005, November 17). The importance of W.H.O. as a critical part of bird flu solution is also signified as the news described how a virus test result done by the local health agency in China was reexamined and proved to be inaccurate with the “help from W.H.O. specialists dispatched to work with officials from the Agriculture Ministry” (Cody, 2005, November 17). In this way, both newspapers framed the international organizations of W.H.O. and U.N., as a double solution to the bird flu issue in China and around the world; that is, they supervised nations’ action in the fight against the disease and they provided advice and technical support for the nations that were in need.



## Conclusion

The role of news media in the global combat against the bird flu is paramount. As a first step to study it, it is essential to analyze newspaper's way of reporting disease news. This study aimed to answer the questions of how two American newspapers framed the bird flu crisis in China and how they associate this specific situation or series of events with other frequently engaged China frames in the U.S. newspapers. This study employed textual analysis of news frames in order to answer these questions. The analysis results indicate both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* framed the bird flu outbreaks in China as a national health, social and political phenomenon. As the impact of bird flu to China is multi-faceted, the study finds the two newspapers' definitions of the disease, explanations of the outbreak causation, moral judgments of the nation and suggested solutions to the crisis also to be multiplex.

Throughout the news coverage by both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the bird flu crisis in China was defined as a Chinese health crisis, an Asian health crisis and an overall global health crisis. Both newspapers stressed bird flu as a global issue in a way to frame it as a lethal disease that came out of China/Asia and was exported to the world. It was also portrayed as a disease transmitted from the poor to the rich. Conversely, these repetitive Asia-world or poor-rich themes are accompanied by the definition of richer European nations as "models" in disease prevention and western-oriented international organizations as the decision makers, solution providers and moral supervisors for China/Asia in the fight against the disease.

Both newspapers use China's poor health conditions and problematic handling of

the bird flu outbreaks to explain the wide spread of the disease and to justify the criticism that the country received. China's poor health conditions and some traditional housing practices in rural areas were frequently mentioned to explain how the virus passed from animals to humans. China's inadequate poultry production practices, its environmental issues such as pollution, the size of the population and the withering public health system were said to help make the country a virtual incubator of the bird flu virus.

Both newspapers' bird flu coverage also contained a significant part of news on Chinese government's response to the disease. Along with the problematic health environmental issue described above, the government's mishandling of the disease was frequently listed as a major cause of the nation's continuous outbreaks. The framing of government's failure usually contained framing of local authorities that were unable to detect outbreaks or intent to cover it up and a central government that failed to press provincial officials to act properly or itself couldn't be frank enough about outbreak situations.

To morally evaluate China in this crisis is a third major part of both newspapers' bird flu coverage. A mixture of positive and negative moral evaluation could be seen to apply to China's cultural, social and political aspects in the crisis. The traditional rural household and poultry production practices were questioned as unhealthy and caused diseases—i.e. people and animal living under the same roof and backyard chicken farms. Farmers were described as irresponsible and unethical in use of improper drugs that help breed a stronger virus and in trying to hide sick birds in the fear of economic loss. On the other hand, both newspapers also showed sympathy to the suffering grassroots population,

describing people in the nation's vast rural areas as an untended part of the society and direct victims of the country's poor living conditions and inadequate health support system.

This study finds the moral evaluation of the Chinese government's role in bird flu outbreaks leaning toward the negative side. Occasionally, news reports included positive comments on the government's improvement of handling the disease in comparison to SARS, but they were overwhelmed by the newspapers' expressions of doubt, suspicion and negative moral evaluation. Within China, the nations' rampant bird flu outbreaks were framed to be caused by both the government's intention to cover it up (a continuation of the SARS cover-up frame) and by its inability to stop its spread. Internationally, often attributed to the secret nature of the Communist government, the Chinese authority was described as hindering the international effort in fighting the disease by slowly providing critical information and refusal to cooperate with international organizations. In reporting worldwide bird flu outbreaks, China was also framed as an exporter of the deadly disease either by its gigantic migrating bird population or, with more emphasis, by its unchecked commercial poultry products, often involving illegal smuggling of poultry to foreign countries that caused the virus to spread around the world.

As the fourth function of bird flu news frames, both newspapers tried to prescribe solution recommendations to the repeating outbreaks in China. These solutions included demands for the Chinese government to be transparent about flu statistics, to be more determined to stop the spread of virus domestically and abroad and to be more

cooperative with foreign governments and international organizations. On the other hand, the role of international society, including wealthy western nations and organizations, was also stressed in terms of providing financial and technical supports and to spur China to deal with the disease squarely.

A comparison of the news articles from both newspapers found positive, neutral and negative news frames in their bird flu coverage (see examples in Table 1), with a majority of negative news frames. From a quantity point of view, *The New York Times* had more news reports on the bird flu situation in China (44 vs. 32), and its news articles were also in general of greater length and more detailed than their counterparts in the *Washington Post*.

Table 1: Major news frames from both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Problem definitions	BF as a Chinese disease. BF as an Asian disease. BF as a disease from the poor to the rich.	The lethality of the virus. The “globalness” of the disease.	China as a source for BF medicines. European nations as “victim” to the disease and “model” in disease prevention.
Causal interpretation	China’s poor health condition: rural/urban. China’s mishandling of the disease outbreaks. Unhealthy traditional housing practice. Local officialdom. Governmental cover-up.	The government as disease information provider. Government’s attempts to control the disease (culling vaccination campaign).	China’s research on BF vaccines. China’s massive campaign stopped outbreaks.
Moral Evaluation	The SARS scandal foreshadows BF cover-up. SARS and BF as example of government’s secrecy. The secrecy nature of Communist government.	The government as deadpan announcer of outbreak info. China’s Communist sticker.	Government’s attempts to check the disease. Government learned from SARS. China’s mobilization ability due to its political structure.
Solution Recommendation	Demand for transparency. Elimination of local officialdom. Demand for more determination to stop disease transmission.	Need for governmental efficiency. Need for open communication.	W.H.O., U.N. and other organizations’ role in helping China to fight against the disease.

### **Reporting public health in China**

The intensive media coverage of an international health crisis can be a double-edged sword. It raises the attention of the international society to the pending danger, and also spurs countries to act properly to fight the disease. On the other hand, intensive media coverage, especially its tight focus on the lethality of diseases/viruses, directly affects the level of public panic and people's perception about whether certain countries are "safe" or not (Freedman, 2005). Bird flu became household words overnight and around the world thanks to the "24/7" news updates from media. This constant media scrutiny and questionable objectivity in reporting foreign matters, especially crises, bring about more concerns (Huang & Leung, 2005).

In the continuing debates of media's reporting on foreign affairs, China has long been complaining about distorted international news media, claiming its national images have been damaged by the biased news coverage in American news media for decades (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad 2000; Lawson, 1998). This study finds this claim to be partially valid. While news from both newspapers had reported the basic bird flu statistics accurately, their news frames about the disease, when put into broader cultural, social political contexts, may not necessarily be objective or accurate. For example, the study found both newspapers frequently mentioned China as the original breeding ground of bird flu despite the evidence showed that the disease first broke out in Vietnam (Rosenthal, 2006, March 6).

Throughout the news materials covered in the study, some common news frames including the impoverished countryside, unhealthy poultry production conditions, and

heavily polluted environment are found to describe the health situation in China, which does not always accurately describe the countryside where the disease appeared most frequently. The nation's responses to the disease were mostly described as slow, ineffective and with secrecy, as the previous analysis section has shown. Reports from both newspapers also frequently referred to China's mishandling of SARS. Despite China's considerable improvements in controlling the bird flu and collaborating with the international society since SARS, news media still continuously used SARS to signify the secret nature of China's Communist government in order to support their argument of bird flu cover-ups.

The media coverage of bird flu from *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* brings not only the disease itself but the whole of China plagued with the disease under the media scrutiny. As the study has demonstrated, reporting on a disease is more than reporting on *the* disease. News reporting on bird flu did more than just to create an image of a deadly virus circulating around the world. News coverage involve a whole set of news frames of definition, explanation and moral judgment about the places and people that are infected with the disease. These news frames could help readers to build a fuller image of a public health crisis—more than just cold numbers and facts—but with the cost of an often distorted perception of faraway lands, their people and culture, and maybe even the disease itself.

### **Limitations of Study**

One limitation of this study is the fact it only examined two major U.S. newspapers' coverage on the bird flu crisis in China. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*,

though two renowned newspaper outlets, may not represent voices from U.S. newspapers overall, let alone U.S. news media in general. It could be argued here that the result of this textural study is valid in giving the readers a snapshot of how the two newspapers represented China in this national crisis. However, it would be inconclusive to apply its results to a broader category of American newspapers or news media in general. In order to achieve a more conclusive framing result, a comprehensive study of the news coverage from other forms of news media, such as television, radio and the Internet, need to be conducted.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has provided a sound basis for future media study on the bird flu crisis in China. As the current study only focuses on two major U.S. newspapers, future studies may include additional newspapers to achieve comprehensive understanding of news media's reporting on Chinese matters. Newspapers like *The Wall Street Journal* may provide news frames from certain perspectives—financial, in this case—of the crisis. With the inclusion of additional study subjects, comparison can then be made to determine whether there will be significant framing differences among different newspapers. The framing studies on bird flu news or Chinese crises should also not be confined to only newspapers. Weekly journals, TV news programs, radio broadcast and Internet news, can all be valid sources for future framing studies.

This framing study on media's news coverage of the bird flu provides an example for future studies on China's public health issues. China's public health situation is becoming an increasing hotspot in American news media. This is due to the strong



commercial tie between America and China. A most recent example is the sudden eruption of news coverage from the U.S. news media on the safety issues of Chinese-made toothpastes, toys, pest foods and seafoods that are circulating in the American markets. How the news media link these issues together and how they link them to the existing Chinese frames in the American news media would be an intriguing question to answer.

### **Discussion**

Some scholars assert that the repeating public health crises in China, including SARS, bird flu and the water contamination accident, had taught the Chinese government a valuable lesson on how to deal with international society with honesty (Freedman, 2005). As it is evident that the intensive international scrutiny had brought changes to the way the Chinese government acts in health crises, experts also predict they would bring more press freedom to China and eventually change the role of local mass media from merely a government mouthpiece and “Party cheerleader” to a watchdog for people’s interests (Kalathil, 2003; Freedman, 2005).

As China continues its economic rise, there is little doubt the nation will receive ever-increasing attention from the American news media for its growing role in the world economic and political order. United States and China both face challenges in their mutual relations. Trade deficit, human rights, immigration, China’s economic and military rise and the consequent challenge to America’s world superiority, and the fundamental ideological clash, to name a few, all mean the nation will continue to grab more attention from America and its news media. China needs to do more about its image

problem. It needs to consider what national image it has presented to the international society and what national image the American media have presented of the country. The Chinese authorities still have much to learn about utilizing American mass media, including newspapers, for their own sake. This is not to say, however, the Chinese government needs to manipulate the American news media to suppress negative news coverage, which would be most unlikely. The problem right now is that China needs to let itself to be heard. It is way too often that critics toward China and Chinese events in the news receive little response, let alone much substantial explanation or rebuttal from the condemned. To more actively respond to news, however, should only be part of China's international media strategy. More efforts should be given to use American news media to articulate China's concerns, to advertise its positions on issues and to spread factual information. China still has a long way to go in order to practice this strategy. It has its own problems: its rigid political system doesn't allow state officials to write freely for foreign media; information spanning from annual military budgets to numbers of commutable disease cases are closed to foreign inquiry; and the heavily controlled, state-run mass media face rigid regulations and censorship and only produce "politically-correct" news.

Internationally, as China struggles to gain a better image overseas, especially after decades of being portrayed as an authoritarian regime, freedom suppressor, warmonger and not-yet-to-be-fully-trusted player in the world political arena, it is essential for the nation to improve its international public relations capability. Therefore, by examining the way the two American newspapers cover a Chinese crisis like bird flu, this study also

aimed to gain insights on how China's authorities could improve their communication protocols and public relations strategies to better interact with international news media. While China's internal problems may require a complete political overhaul in order to be solved in the long run, these improvements could still help to provide open communication channels, facilitate communication of facts and reduce suspicions and rumors both domestically and internationally.

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