

Combating Covid-19: Analysis of China-Related Reports by Arab Mainstream Media Using Big Data

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Abstract: At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 broke out and rapidly swept across the globe. Due to the widespread epidemic, the news coverage of Arab mainstream media changes in a volatile realm ranging from the Chinese perspective to the local and international perspective. In this sense, the author conducts a data-driven web news research tracking the Arabic mass online public opinion changes and transformation via co-word analysis and other quantitative content analyzing approaches in the first three months of the outbreak of the epidemic. While taking China-related reports by Arab mainstream media as the main research object to elaborate and analyze, Arabic mainstream news agency's news frame and agenda priority, as well as Arabic people's attitude variations and possible corresponding causes, are also scrutinized and summarized. Based on big data analysis, this paper concludes that the first three months of the outbreak of the epidemic was the period with the highest occurrence, along with the largest amount of news reports, and the most complex emotional tendency. Going through four-staged ferments and fluctuations, public opinion embedded in the Arab mainstream is now in a smooth state.

1. Introduction

As a global public health emergency, COVID-19 has attracted worldwide media coverage and thus becoming a controversial and valuable event. With the spread of the epidemic, its derivatives have become wider and already formed a more extensive and fluctuating public opinion. China is not only the main battlefield to fight against the epidemic, but also the focus of international public opinions. The Arab region is one of the Chinese important partners of the *Belt and Road* initiative, of which its mainstream media are particularly concerned about the epidemic's causes, trendings, and the Chinese public health governance.

2. Research Design and Methods

This study utilizes Quantitative Text Analysis (QTA) for big data statistics about the China-related reports by Arab mainstream media. Reinhard Köhler and Sven Naumann pointed out that QTA is a method that combines computer technology to process a large number of data automatically and systematically in social science research.^① QTA is employed to form a research map through the occurrence frequency and similarity of keywords based on the China-related reports by Arab mainstream media in the early three months from the beginning reporting of the epidemic COVID-19, to conduct a thorough analysis of the current research situation as well. Using *COVID-19* and *China* as the main keywords, this study conducts a big data search on the representative mainstream media in the Arab region and respectively analyzes their China-related news coverage. It was found that the relevant reports almost began to appear at the end of December 2019, of which the number showed rapid growth, and reached a new peak with the fast spread of the epidemic. Until March 5th, 2020, the Egyptian daily newspaper *The Pyramids* reported 1000 relevant reports, Qatar's *Al Jazeera* reached 428 news stories, Saudi Arabia's *The Middle East* released 1207, UAE's *Sky News Arabia* report amount was 906. (Figure 1)

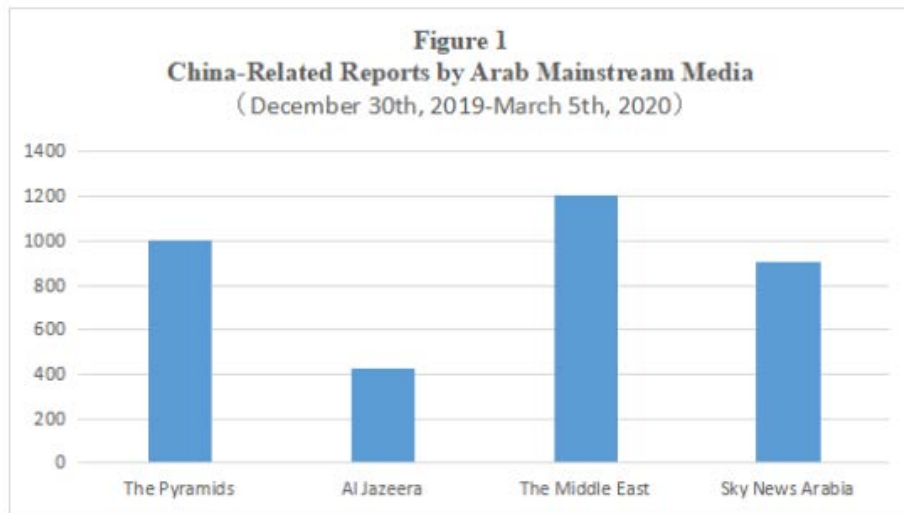


Fig.1 China-Related Reports by Arab Mainstream Media

Source: Author-Made

Based on QTA, this study adopts Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to analyze samples deeply and abstractly. As proposed by German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer, QCA was first used in the early 1950s when the research of communication reached its peak.^② Then it is widely used in the analysis of books, essays, interviews, historical documents, diaries, plays, speeches, advertising words, and other verbal communication works.^③ In the field of communication, QTA and QCA are often used together, namely deeply analyzing the certain sample texts by QCA based on QTA.^④ This study selected 200 new stories with relatively in-depth and major research value reports for translating and analyzing, which was found that the sources of the COVID-19, the measures of Chinese fighting against the epidemic, and the impacts of the epidemic on the *Belt and Road* initiative were the main points that the Arab mainstream media focus on. The Arab mainstream media also reported the China-US trade war and the Hong Kong news. Other issues, such as education, oil trade, and prediction of the future of the epidemic, were also covered in the reports. (Figure 2)

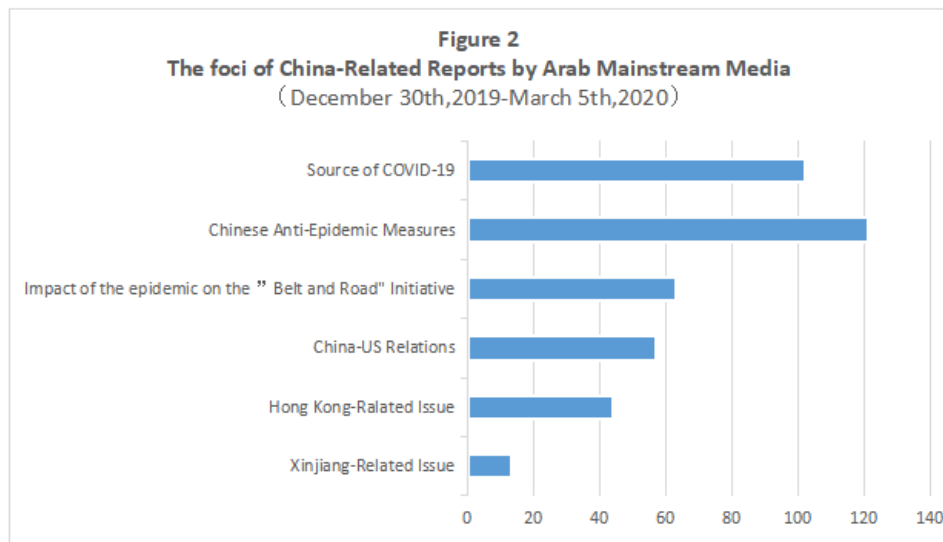


Fig.2 The Foci of China-Related Reports by Arab Mainstream Media

Source: Author-Made

3. The Focus of China-Related Reports by Arab Mainstream Media

COVID-19 broke out and rapidly swept across the globe at the beginning of 2020. Due to the

widespread epidemic, the news coverage of Arab mainstream media changes in a volatile realm ranging from the Chinese perspective to the local and international perspective. In this sense, the author conducts a data-driven web news research tracking the Arabic mass online public opinion changes and transformation via co-word analysis and other quantitative content analyzing approaches in the first three months of the outbreak of the epidemic. While taking China-related reports by Arab mainstream media as the main research object to elaborate and analyze, Arabic mainstream news agency's news frame and agenda priority, as well as Arabic people's attitude variations and possible corresponding causes, are also scrutinized and summarized. Based on big data analysis, this paper concludes that the first three months of the outbreak of the epidemic was the period with the highest occurrence, along with the largest amount of news reports, and the most complex emotional tendency. Going through four-staged ferments and fluctuations, public opinion embedded in the Arab mainstream is now in a smooth state.

The Arab mainstream media was concerned about the source of the COVID-19, and the reports mainly showed three aspects. Firstly, the natural cause led to the production of the epidemic. This view was concentrated in the early period citing from other countries' opinions (This view has been overturned). Secondly, some Arab mainstream media reported that a Chinese institute or a lab leak led to the epidemic (This view mainly cited the reports by western media).^⑤ For example, Qatar's Al-Jazeera cited Washington Post and reported that in 2017, Wuhan, China established a virology institute to study SARS, Ebola, and other highly transmitted viruses, but there is a possibility of leakage because China is not strict with the research procedure for the animal living body.^⑥ Third, some Arab mainstream media reported the COVID-19 is suspected to start from the United States and revealed that confirmed cases outside China had not been to Wuhan and had not connected infected individuals from Wuhan, so that the source of the virus may not be from China. The COVID-19 might be the biological weapon of the United States to attack China during the period of the China-US trade war.^⑦

Chinese anti-epidemic measures were also one of the points the Arab mainstream media focused on, which mainly reported three aspects about it. First, the Arab media generally reported the Chinese government had responded quickly to the epidemic, made decisive decisions, and effectively controlled the spread of the virus openly and transparently. Lebanon's Almanara reported "In response to the COVID-19, the Chinese government has set up a hospital in less than 10 days. What would happen if the epidemic occurred in other countries?"^⑧ Al-Jazeera also reported *The Chinese government has issued a series of prevention and control measures to minimize the spread of the virus, including isolating Wuhan, canceling the festival celebrations, and urging citizens to wear masks.*^⑨ Second, the Arab mainstream media highly praised Chinese people in the fight against the epidemic, say, the most shocking thing is the discipline of the Chinese people, who strictly abide by the anti-epidemic measures taken by the government. In the past few weeks, there is no anti-social situation, such as monopoly goods, price hike, robbery, etc. in Wuhan, a city with a population of more than a 60million people.^⑩ Besides, Arab media also focused on the simplicity and greatness of the Chinese common people in fighting against the epidemic, such as front-line doctors, ordinary nurses, and express workers. Chinese people are hardworking, brave, united, and friendly, who are the best card for Chinese culture. Third, the Arab mainstream media was also focused on Chinese science and technology power in the fight against the epidemic, such as the UAVS helped to maintain social order, the *Zero Contact* express service facilitated people's life, the high-tech medical treatment reduced the pressure on doctors and patients, and distance education enabled students to receive knowledge at home. Al-Arabiya of Saudi Arabia reported: *After the epidemic, Chinese cities will quickly move forward to smart cities. Scientific and technological medical treatment, flexible office, intelligent transportation, and distance education will become the new trend of Chinses future development.*^⑪

The Arab mainstream media also focused on the impact of the epidemic on the *Belt and Road* initiative. China and Arab countries had already signed a lot of cooperation agreements based on the initiative, which encountered a halt because the epidemic led many international airports and trade

ports to close. The related reports focused on the following perspectives: on the one hand, The Arab mainstream media focused on the Chinese economy and analyzed its growth index in the first quarter of this year. Although the data showed unoptimistic, they generally believed that was temporary, and the long-term development worth expecting. There were reports also stressed if the Chinese economy encountered Waterloo, the whole world would drop into a deep crisis. Among these reports about the economics, tourism, aviation, oil and other industries closely related to the development of Arab society was the focus of the attention of its media.^⑫ On the other hand, the Arab mainstream media paid attention to the trade contacts with China and analyzed Arab countries might develop India, Malaysia, and other markets to replace Chinese small commodity trade, and explore African markets to solve the export problems of oranges and grapes.^⑬ Third, infrastructure projects were also concerned about. Many factories were closed because of the epidemic, which affected the implementation of the Arab cooperation agreements with China, therefore the Arab mainstream media focused on the infrastructure projects.

4. Changes and Underlying Reasons of Arab Media Reporting Attitudes

International and local public opinion is changing overtimes, the attitude of the Arab mainstream media towards China, which can be divided into four stages: wait-and-see period, negative emotion period, calm period, and positive emotion period.

Wait-and-see period: In early January 2020, the Arab mainstream media launched a series of reports about COVID-19, which was called “mysterious virus”, “suspected SARS, serious, unknown cause, highly infectious”.^⑭ Youm 7 reported *a mysterious virus of unknown origin had been found, which was highly infectious. It also issued five suspected SARS cases that had been found in Hong Kong, including two women who stayed in Wuhan two weeks ago*.^⑮ Similar reports in the early period were mostly individual cases, and the Arab media did not carry out intensive reports, which was still in the wait-and-see stage.

Negative emotion period: From late January to early February of the year 2020, the China-related reports by Arab mainstream media entered a period of negative emotion, of which the reasons mainly due to the following factors: First, the main reason for the negative emotion of the Arab mainstream media about China was that COVID-19 may be related to Chinese people eating wild animals carrying the virus, and the seafood market in Wuhan, China probably be the place where was found the virus first. There are strict regulations on the Muslim diet in the Qur'an, which they are forbade eating bats, pangolins, and other similar wild animals. Second, influenced by Western media reports. During the early period of the epidemic outbreak, China focused on finding the source of the virus, controlling the spread of the epidemic and alleviating people's panic, etc., who did not pay attention to media publicity, when the western media released a large number of relevant news which provided material for the Arab media when they needed news most, that affected their attitude to China.

Calm period: Although there was some negative emotional news about China in the early period of the epidemic outbreak, the objective analysis reports still occupied the Arab mainstream media. Since the early February of the year 2020, the negative emotions of China-related reports had decreased, and the objective analysis occupied the majority. The overall reporting trend had entered a calm period, which the following main reasons caused this change: First, Chinese media provided timely reference news. With the increasing number of Chinese media reports, the analysis of the Arab mainstream media about China became warm and objective. Second, the increasing news had led Arab media to analyze calmly. Since the beginning of February, the reports of the epidemic situation in the mainstream Arab media had been growing extremely, and the objective reports and rational analysis were breaking the tide. The analysis of the source of the epidemic, economy, society, education, China's anti-epidemic measures, and the living conditions of the people had become the mainstream trend.

Positive emotion period: After the calm period, the number of reports about positive emotions of China-related reports had increased greatly, which were mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, released friendly signals at the diplomatic level. During the outbreak of the epidemic, Arab governments voiced their support for China and donated medical materials for Chinese people. Many buildings in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt lit up slogans cheering for China. Second, the Arab mainstream media praised China-anti epidemic measures and believed that Chinese performance in the fight against the epidemic was worth learning. Third, the lack of transparency in some countries in the reporting of the epidemic situation caused social panic. There were also some countries' governments that could not control the epidemic situation or effectively guided the people to isolate. About the reports of the global spread of the epidemic situation and the national anti-epidemic, some mainstream Arab media suggested learning China-anti epidemic measures.

5. Conclusion

As a public health emergency around the world, the COVID-19 had attracted worldwide media coverage and had become a hot-debated issue. A wide range of public opinions had been emerging day by day with the epidemic spreading. China is not only the main battlefield to fight against the epidemic, but also the significant focus of public opinions. During that period, the Arab mainstream media paid unprecedented attention to China, especially focused on the source of the virus, Chinese anti-epidemic measures, the *Belt and Road* initiative, etc. The attitude towards China also showed four stages: the wait-and-see period, the negative emotion period, the calm period, and the positive emotion period.

The audience environment restricts the news communication so that the communication to Arab people needs to take into account the cultural characteristics of the Arab nation. The pursuit of the audience constitutes the ideological environment of news communication, and the mainstream ideology formed by ideals, beliefs, and values determines the communication content and amount of information of important news. News suitable for people's conscious environment is easy to obtain communication advantages, and news that conflicts with the conscious environment will not become conventional communication content. Therefore, China's media communication should pay attention to the emotional characteristics of the target country.

For the impact of international media, Chinese media are suggested to boost their actions in time, tap the energy to report veritable facts and build the image of China overseas in an all-rounded way. First of all, the Chinese media to Arab countries should take care of their religious feelings. The vast majority of Arabs believe in Islam which many ethnic minorities in China believe in. Therefore, showing the living conditions and cultural characteristics of Muslims in China to the Arab world as a window to strengthen the understanding of the Arab people about our country can enhance the consensus between the two peoples. Secondly, it is very important to establish the credibility of Chinese media in the Arab world and master the initiative and voice of communication. The credibility of the media is consistent with its coverage in a certain region. And only with high credibility, the coverage of the media can remain high. So that when the Chinese media establish high credibility in the Arab world as soon as possible can they grasp the initiative and voice of communication there. Thirdly, all news has timeliness which is the universal law of all dynamic news. If it is not reported quickly and in time, the latest events will become old news. The timeliness of news is also the embodiment of the ability of news media, which affects its credibility to a certain extent. The information released at the first time is most likely to win the trust of the audience. The process of Chinese media's communication to the Arab world is not only a race with Arab media but also a race with major mainstream media in the whole world, including social media and web media. Therefore, Chinese media reports need to make the news timely, rapid and strive to deliver it to the Arab people at the first time, to improve the credibility of Chinese media in Arab countries in terms of timeliness.

In addition, overseas Chinese are the best business cards for China's image, which is particularly important to build a link between the people of China and the Arab world. In the fight against the epidemic, they joined the anti-epidemic army with concerted efforts, making the local people see the unity of the Chinese people. What's more, many Arab people who are friendly to China appear in the media, which can promote the audience to understand the real China. Once a visiting

professor at the Middle East School of Beijing International Studies University published an article in a famous Arabic paper, who said that Chinese people about their solidarity and diligence, their advanced and pragmatic education, which helped Arab people understand China more. Therefore, we should pay attention to these overseas Chinese and Arab people who visited China before and try our best to build common feelings between Chinese and Arab people.

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