

## The Coverage of the Marginal Groups by Chinese and U.s. Media under a Major Health Emergency-- during the Covid-19 Pandemic Era

Yufeng Dong<sup>1,a</sup>, Yitian, Lin<sup>2,b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Communication University of China, Tv Editing, Jiangsu, China

<sup>2</sup>New York University, Economics, Jilin, China

<sup>a</sup> 953321400@qq.com ; <sup>b</sup>yitianlin00@gmail.com

**Keywords:** Marginal group, Covid-19 pandemic, Symbolic interactionism, Information cocoons

**Abstract:** This paper centers on how the Chinese media and the U.S. media covers the reports of the marginal groups and their possible strategies to bring the “ignored group” back to the public’s view. The paper will start with introducing the definition of the “marginal man” as well as how media belongs to different historical and cultural backgrounds adapt the concept and categorized the “marginal group” differently. It is worth mentioning that the meaning of the “marginal group” is also subject to change when a sudden global health emergency outbreak. Then the article will relate symbol interactionism to the changing perception of the concepts as well as facts, and how media should use the theory to better introduce the marginal group’s stories. Lastly, this paper points out some challenges such reports may face under the current situation of “information cocoons”.

### 1. Introduction

The term “marginal man” was first introduced by Robert E. Park, an American urban sociologist considered one of the most influential figures in early U.S. sociology. In his work “Human Migration and the Marginal Man”, he refers to “marginal man” as a cultural hybrid, who lives in the middle of two cultures that can not be integrated. The “marginal men” are separated from the original cultural system, but could not adapt to the new cultural environment, so they are separated from the two societies or groups (Park, 1928). Based on Parker's theory, his student Everett Stonequist has further improved the definition of marginal people. He thinks that the emergence of marginal people is not only caused by immigration, but also influenced by education, marriage, and other aspects (Stonequist, 1935). With the continuous development of the research on marginal groups, the well-accepted academic definition of “marginal people” are people who are isolated from their social groups and not accepted by others.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the lives of numerous people across the world have been largely affected. Under such circumstances, the role of the media became extremely important to inform the public of the news and data that related to the global health emergency. In this way, the media not only guarantees the public’s right to know, but also helps avoid unnecessary social panic (if the media tells information properly), as well as serves as a guideline of how the public should behave under the pandemic. Nevertheless, a special aspect of the reports is those about the “marginal group”. When facing a health emergency as Covid-19, people have to stand together to prevent the harm of it, which requires us to not only protect ourselves, but also to help each other. To achieve this purpose, the stories of the “marginal group” under the pandemic are needed to be brought in front of the mainstream through the media.

### 2. Background: Different Influence of Covid-19 to the United States and to China and Different Roles Their Media Played

In the United States, the pandemic has been causing a relatively large number of patients and casualties throughout the past two years, and it is also affecting the economic status and mental health of healthy people greatly. The U.S. news reports about the Covid-19 have been showing a

larger level of skewness towards certain topics. Actually, at the beginning of the pandemic, the U.S. official media was accused by the public of giving ambiguous and sometimes even contradicted information about the virus or how the public should deal with it. Part of the reason can be explained by Steve Doig, a data specialist and professor of Journalism and Media Communication: “This is new, journalists only have been focused on (the coronavirus) for a few months. No matter what you covered before, now we are all medical writers; everybody is scrambling to get up to speed on the virus. There still are many unknowns” (Ricchiardi, 2020). But later most of the media started to cover more coherent information of the pandemic and the proper guidelines for the public, as well as serve its role to supervise, advise or even criticize the government behavior( for example, Covid-19 was once used as a racism tool by some U.S. politicians). However, this can also lead to problems that some reports actively engaging in the “political fight”, with a focus remained still on the comparisons and criticisms on covid policies conducted by different political parties, rather than the pandemic itself.

Though part of the stories of the “invisible crowd” indeed entered the public view, some of the news media workers are calling for more attention toward the issue. “Giving voice to the voiceless is more critical now than ever,” said two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Martha Mendoza of the Associated Press. “Marginalized immigrants, the homeless, the incarcerated, the poor need to be reached as part of the coverage” (Ricchiardi, 2020).

On the other hand, the situation of the Covid-19 in China was a very different story. Though there was a severe outbreak of the pandemic at the very beginning which caused chaos for weeks, after a strict lockdown, the covid situation in China became much better, with a very little daily increase of covid cases (usually under 100). As a result, in China, neither the public health nor the economic situation was as largely affected by Covid-19 as it was in the United States. In general, the national covid-related news can be fewer or less diverse than those in the United States. Most of the mainstream media chose to only speak with facts, such as government policies, guidelines of public behavior under the pandemic, as well as opinions of the authorized medical scholars. The reports had a strong focus on “how the government was dealing with the virus, and even the reported stories of individuals are often the frontline doctors and nurses, as well as backup support teams who helped fought with the pandemic” (Guo Hongbin, Wu Yanlin, 2020). In general, the Chinese media played a crucial role in stabilizing the social panic and giving guidelines to the public.

### **3. Different Definition of the “Marginal Group” between the U.s. Media and Chinese Media**

In the United States, the original definition of the “marginal group” was very similar to the definition that Everett Stonequist gave to “marginal man”: that a group of people who are isolated from a larger population and not accepted due to ethnic, cultural, economical or other social factors. It is worth mentioning that, with its diverse immigrations, the United States always emphasizes social issues about different ethnic groups compared to other groups. Due to historical reasons, certain ethnic groups are often bound to certain social-economic classes. For instance, the majority of the African American group falls into the low-income group. Under the pandemic, the U.S. media generally have a special focus on the ethnic and economical “marginal groups”.

Nevertheless, the definition of the “marginal group” can have a different meaning in China because of the different historical and cultural backgrounds. Even though China is now a mono-ethnic country, the ethnic group Han was the vast majority of the population. Also, compared to the United States, China has very few foreign immigrants. As a result, when speaking of the ‘marginal group’, the Chinese media will be less likely to consider ethnic-different groups, but a higher possibility to find those groups based on their economical status. For example, in the article “Urban Space Discussion: the Media focus and the Self-expression of the Marginal Group” written in 2018, the author refers to the “marginal group” as the migrant workers in the city (Fang Lingling, 2008). In other Chinese academic papers, the term “marginal group” can be describing the left-behind children, the unemployed, the elder, or the disabled. All of the above groups share a common characteristic: they are the low-income group in society.

### **3.1 Focus of the “Marginal Group” under Covid Covered by the U.S. Media: the Minor-Ethnicity**

In the United States, marginal groups that got reported are usually categorized by ethnicity group. For instance, in the article “Coronavirus coverage: giving a voice to the vulnerable with data on your side” published in June 2020, the author pointed out that “according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 23% of reported COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. were African American as of 20 May 2020, even though black people make up roughly 13% of the U.S. population” (Ricchiardi, 2020). He used solid facts and data to show that as an ethnic minority group (a marginal group), African Americans are more vulnerable to the pandemic. Not only did the ethnic minority suffer the health and economic issues more under Covid-19, but the group can also suffer socially and mentally. Throughout the pandemic, U.S. journalism and media workers reported a large number of news and stories that show the hatred towards Asians had been boosted because of Covid-19. According to NBC News, in April 2020, the “new report finds 169 percent surge in anti-Asian hate crimes during the first quarter” (Yam, 2021). The media continuously called the public the stop “Asian Hate” by showing data as well as interviewing individuals who fall in the minority group.

### **3.2 Focus of the “Marginal Group” under Covid Covered by the Chinese Media: the Groups That Were Affected the Most**

As mentioned above, due to the fact that the Covid-19 had not affected the public living in China as much compared to those living in the United States, it is reasonable that the reports about the pandemic will be fewer. Though, several kinds of “marginal groups” still got to covered by the journalism and media workers. At the beginning of the outbreak, the group that was most affected by the virus was the residents in the city of Wuhan. They have experienced the most severe pandemic as well as very strict lockdowns. It was actually the exposure of their personal experiences covered by we media on social media platforms that raised the public’s vigilance towards the virus. For example, China Youth Daily created an in-depth report about the vivid stories of Wuhan residents’ lives under the pandemic in March 2020 (Sun Qinglin, Zhu Juanjuan, Du li, 2020). Another group was the people who are most likely to get covid in the later phase: those who came back to China from foreign countries. Among them, a large group is the international student group. Both two groups, the Wuhan residents and the come-back-to-China group might be not considered as the “marginal group” by the given definition such as immigrants or low-income people. However, both groups could fit in the description that they “were isolated from their social groups and not accepted by others” at some point. Due to their higher exposure to the virus, the two groups were once feared, or even hated, by the main public. However, then the media started to convey more and deeper individual stories of these “marginal groups” that helped to decrease the misunderstanding and maintaining social harmony.

## **4. Symbolic Interactionism and the Marginal Group Covered by Media under the Pandemic**

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological frame of reference to better understand how individuals interact with one another to create symbolic worlds, and in return, how these worlds shape individual behaviors (Hall, 2007). It suggests that:

- (1) A thing does not have an objective meaning itself; its meaning is given through the process of human’s social interaction;
- (2) In the process of social interaction, people respond to things according to their understanding of the meaning of things;
- (3) Human understanding of the meaning of things can change with the process of social interaction, not unchanged.

We can apply the theory when we are discussing the concept of “marginal group”. The reason why in the United States the “marginal groups” is more likely to refers to the minor-ethnicity whereas in China it is more likely to mean the lower-income groups is because of different

historical backgrounds and thus different social interactions that people had between the two countries. The term “Marginal group” can also change under the global health emergency, as in China residents in Wuhan and international students could fit in the term under the change of social interaction.

While the change of the meaning of a concept can be pretty obvious, the underlying meaning of an objective fact will also change while perceiving by humans. For example, in the beginning, Covid-19 showed a very high mortality rate, but after some time its mortality rate was only a little higher than normal flu. As a result, in places like China where the pandemic was suffering prevented before its mortality rate decreases, the Chinese perception towards this virus will still be a dreadful and killing disease. However, for people living in the United States, where they have experienced a relatively low mortality rate and high morbidity rate, the social interaction changed thus their perception of the pandemic will not be a disaster that serious, maybe only “annoying” because of the quarantine. Therefore, for the Chinese and the Americans, the Covid-19 virus will be different things for the two groups, which also falls in the theory of Symbolic interactionism.

We could also explore symbolic interactionism through how the journalism and media workers tell a report under the pandemic. A bad example to report a marginal group will be the article “California governor proposes \$12 billion to house state’s homeless population” published by PBS (Nicholson, 2021). The article wrote only about the policy without introducing any of the marginal groups. Thus, the readers symbolize the “homeless people” as the group who “got a large amount of money”, without considering or at least underestimating the hardships the marginal group had during the Covid-19 period. Thus, this report could not raise more support towards the homeless but create more misunderstanding. Considering symbolic interactionism, it will be better to tell purely the story about the homeless’s suffering. A more personal story, either conducted from an interview or even written through the first-person perspective will work better to increase the attention towards the marginal group. Though, on the other hand, a purely emotional and personal story could also lead to chaos. The personal stories of the Wuhan residents exposed at the beginning of the pandemic once led to anxiety and pain to a lot of viewers. The mental issues of the public could lead to serious social upheavals. As a result, while conveying the marginal group, the journalism, and media workers need to make sure the symbolic meaning of the group is balanced, that the group is “suffering” in the pandemic yet “being helped” by the government. Then, the information that the public received could create a more harmonic and healthy social interaction, where the public starts to care for the marginal group without damaging their own mental health.

## **5. Information Cocoons and the Environment That the Readers See the Stories of the Marginal Group**

Information cocoons is a concept proposed by Cass R. Sunstein in his book “Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge”. It suggests that “people develop means-or have the means made for them by others- of filtering information that suits their predispositions” (Sunstein, 2006). Sunstein believes that as Internet technology develops, the individual’s initiative control ability to their own information consumption is enhanced. Users are more likely to access the information based on personal preferences, social relations, and search engines. Meanwhile, platforms or algorithms lead to the solidification of people’s access to certain information. Thus, people’s lives will be shackled in the cocoon-like “cocoon room”.

When the information is about a marginal group, the “information cocoons” are more likely to happen, as the original audience of such a topic will be limited to a niche. Usually, the audience will be the discussed minority group themselves, because they are the ones that are interested in the topic. However, this can deepen the gap between the minority group and the main public, simply as the minority continuously read about the content of their own group either because of their personal choice or algorithm and feel a certain way (grievance, pain, anger, etc.), while the general public could not resonate with the minority group because they didn’t access to any information about the minority group. Therefore, the two groups could not understand each other and may cause further social conflicts. To prevent this problem, there need to be enough media to send the information

about a certain minority group together, so that majority of the main public cannot miss the information.

## 6. Conclusion

The crucial functions of media include delivering and communicating information as well as breaking down barriers and conflicts. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us these two functions became indispensable under a global public health emergency. With its role of providing related information and guidelines to the public and placating the public and maintaining social harmony, the media need to pay more attention to report the lives of the marginal group, to bring the “ignored people” back in front of the public. The Chinese and the U.S. media had reported the “marginal groups” based on each own historical, cultural background, as well as adapting the influence of the pandemic. Combining the mass communication theories such as “symbolic interactionism” and “information cocoons”, both media group are choosing their strategies to introduce the “marginal group” properly, without increasing the misunderstanding. The next thing the Chinese and U.S. media group can do is to understand the different backgrounds and focuses of each other and try to eliminate the misunderstanding and hatred between nations by introducing the “foreign groups” to their own public, aiming to achieve social harmony on a global scale.

## References

- [1] Hall, Peter M., “Symbolic Interaction”. Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, 2007.
- [2] Nicholson, Lucy, “California governor proposes \$12 billion to house state’s homeless population”. PBS news, May 11, 2021.
- [3] Park, Robert E., “Human Migration and the Marginal Man”. The American Journal of Sociology, May 1928.
- [4] Ricchiardi, Sherry, “Coronavirus coverage: giving a voice to the vulnerable with data on your side”. DataJournalism, June 3, 2020.
- [5] Stonequist, Everett, “The Problem of the Marginal Man”. The American Journal of Sociology, July 1935.
- [6] Sunstein, Cass R., “Infotopia: How many Minds Produce Knowledge”. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 273 pp.
- [7] Yam, Kimmy, “New report finds 169 percent surge in anti-Asian hate crimes during the first quarter”. NBC news, April 18, 2021.
- [8] Lingling,Fang,”Urban Spatial dialogue: Media understratum concern and the Self-writing of marginalized groups”.’Contemporary media’, 2008, 2:64.
- [9] Hongbin,Guo, Yanlin,Wu,”The role of mainstream media in COVID-19 coverage”.’Voice & Screen World’,2020,10.
- [10] Qingling,Sun,Juanjuan, Zhu,Li,Du,” Fate is determined by man not by god - Remember the people of Wuhan under the epidemic”.China Youth Network,2020,03.