

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
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**REPRESENTATION OF CORONAVIRUS IN THE WALL STREET  
JOURNAL AND THE NEW YORK TIMES**

**BA THESIS**

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## ABSTRACT

Since January of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has received a lot of global media attention. The aim of this thesis is to explore the representation of the pandemic in two highly respected newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The corpus consists of a total of 291 articles from both newspapers. Sketch Engine software is used for the corpus analysis.

The introduction discusses the nature of news and points out various factors that influence the process of deciding which news is worth covering. Chapter 1 provides an overview of previous studies on media representation of the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics. Chapter 2 describes the created corpora in greater detail and introduces the method of analysis. The process of conducting the corpus analysis is introduced and the key findings discussed. The conclusion compares the results to previous research and makes recommendations for further research.

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## INTRODUCTION

News provides people with easy access to information on what is going on not only in their own country but in the whole world. This kind of access to a wide range of information has benefitted the world but it has also caused problems. Generally, people believe that media is trustworthy, but it is also a well-known fact that news can never be completely neutral as it is always reported from some particular angle. As news is inevitably positioned by its very nature, Roger Fowler (1991: 2) has described it as a *practice*: a discourse that does not give out neutral information on social reality and empirical facts but makes news.

Although journalists in quality newspapers aim toward balance and objectivity, they are members of a society and culture that shape their perception of the world and what is important in the world. Their positioning shapes what they consider newsworthy and how the story is made understandable and relatable to the reading public. News is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a creation of the journalistic process. Therefore, news is not something that just exists or is “found“, but something that involves decisions about what to cover (Fowler 1991: 13).

Filtering and restricting news input is necessary because not all events that happen on any given day have the same relevance. Some events are defined as being more important than others. That choice, however, is not always simple: presidential elections in one’s own country cross the threshold of relevance but not necessarily elections in another country. Things become even more complicated when the newspaper has to decide whether to cover a sports event or a student protest. There is a complex set of criteria of newsworthiness called ‘news values’ that guide the news media to select the events for reporting. Fowler (1991: 13) states that “the origins of news values are diverse: they include general values about society

such as ‘consensus’ and ‘hierarchy’; journalistic conventions; nature of sources; publication frequency and schedule; and so on” (Fowler 1991: 13).

Johann Galtung and Mari Ruge have formulated a widely accepted list of “cultural criterial factors” of news values: frequency; threshold; absolute intensity; intensity increase; unambiguity; meaningfulness; cultural proximity; relevance; consonance; predictability; demand; unexpectedness; unpredictability; scarcity; continuity; composition; reference to elite nations (developed Western nations that dominate in world news); reference to elite people (political leaders, prominent businesspeople, celebrities); reference to persons and reference to something negative. The more criteria an event fulfills, the more likely it will be covered in the news (Fowler 1991: 13; Peterson 1981). Thus, for example, an unexpected event of great intensity in an elite nation, like the 9/11 attacks in the USA have greater news value than predictable ethnic tensions between two countries in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic that unpredictably overwhelmed elite nations with a sudden increase in intensity and great negative impact on people also has great news value.

Determining what events should be covered in the news is the first important step in the journalistic process, followed by the second step: deciding how to write or talk about it. This step is influenced by a set of complex factors. One of them is the corporate media owners’ influence over news content. News is an industry, which is to an extent controlled by the need to make a profit (Fowler 1991: 2, 20). Therefore, the financial interests of media owners influence newspaper editorials and other news outlets as the main economic purpose for newspapers seems to be to sell advertising space (Gilens, Hertzman 2000; Fowler 1991: 121).

This has also continued in online media where profit is generated by the number of clicks a story receives. It has been stressed that same corporate owners control many media

outlets, which raises the possibility for conflicts of interest because it may constrain what the papers write (for example, newspapers might not draw attention to the problems in some other company owned by the same parent). In news organizations owned by large conglomerates the matters they cover are somewhat connected to their corporate parents' financial position, meaning that newspapers tend to project topics that benefit the commercial success of their proprietors (Gilens, Hertzman 2000; Fowler 1991: 121).

The choice does not always revolve around business concerns. Journalistic process might also be influenced by the corporate media owners' political views, which are related to their personal ideological beliefs. In addition, there is a possibility that journalists judge newsworthiness of a certain story based on their own ideological inclinations, even when they are doing their best to stay objective. Leaving out news or perspectives that do not support their personal thoughts and values may be unconscious (Hassell et al 2020).

Alongside corporate media owners and journalists, language plays an important role in media bias because it helps to manipulate with information. John. E Richardson (2007: 10) identifies five fundamental assumptions about language. Firstly, language is social, as it exists in a kind of dialogue with society: society produces the language and it goes on to help recreate it. Secondly, language enacts identity, which in part means that people project themselves as a certain type of person depending on who they are spending time with and what they are trying to achieve. Thirdly, language is always active (Richardson 2007: 12); it is always directed at doing something, whether it is informing about an event or exposing someone's wrongdoings, etc. The fourth assumption is that language has power, as some ways of speaking or communicating are more effective than others. The last assumption claims that language is political; this is an obvious outcome of the two assumptions that language is social and has power (Richardson 2007:13).

From these assumptions we can see that media can be a tool of pressure. It plays a significant role in political campaigns, conflicts, and peace, showing us that language always reflects some ideological perspective (Abbas 2020; Fowler 1991; 10). It is important to note that language use is never fully democratic because some people have more access to media and can seem more credible than others. The opinions of the people with power are taken to be more authoritative than those of ordinary people (Richardson 2007: 12, 13).

To sum up, journalism is inevitably positioned, even if it avoids open bias. News cannot cover every single event. Media has to choose the information somehow, and even if newspapers try to be as balanced as possible, they are not objective. In certain topics, like politics, bias is more noticeable than in others and often this bias creates disagreements and arguments between people. There are other subjects besides politics that give rise to controversies, for example epidemics. In their case, too, media has to decide how to cover the epidemic to avoid panic, to spread correct information and challenge misinformation and to encourage desired public behaviors. This is not always easy if the pandemic touches important social values, like the freedom of speech or freedom of movement or when there are concerns about the politicization of the response to the pandemic (Zhang and Shaw 2020).

These topics have become very urgent since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus, which was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization on January 30 and a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Hart et al; World Health Organization 2021). Statistics show that this is a highly contagious and a deadly virus; by April 2021 there have been more than 137 000 000 cases and almost 3 million have died (World Health Organization 2021). Since the start of 2020 people's every-day life changed drastically: social activities and mobility were restricted

alongside stay-at-home orders, businesses were closed and people had to start participating in remote work and schooling (Dobrinsky and Hargittai 2021). Media has been important during the outbreak because through news people receive information about the virus, new rules and restrictions. People had to change their usual behavior and media helped to guide them towards accepting the new social norms.

Besides the traditional media outlets there is also social media, which makes the current situation different from all the past pandemics. Social media is a powerful tool for social interactions and education, however it has also caused problems with fake news as the information spreads rather quickly and is not carefully reviewed like traditional media (Wong et al 2020). This has only increased the importance of balanced coverage in traditional media.

Media plays a critical role in people's lives. The way media covers important topics (e.g the coronavirus pandemic) may potentially influence our opinions and behaviour. Therefore, to understand how people's views could be shaped, it is necessary to research COVID-19's representation in the news. The present thesis will look at two leading newspapers from the USA: *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in April and October 2020. The present thesis aims to find out how COVID-19 is represented in the two newspapers. Additionally, the thesis will try to find out whether the representation is emotional and if this use of emotion can be viewed as having a political undertone, encouraging readers to position themselves in a specific way in relation to American politics. This question is relevant because presidential elections were held in the USA in November 2020 and it can thus be hypothesized that the coverage of the pandemic may also have a political undertone. This is why one of the newspapers chosen is more liberal (*The New York Times*) and the other more conservative (*The Wall Street Journal*). This far, most research on media discourse has used qualitative tools, but the present thesis will test the usefulness

of the Sketch Engine corpus analysis tool in order to conduct a thorough study of the newspaper comparisons and of the degree of politicization in them.

The literature review will cover research already done on media representations of pandemics and COVID-19. The methodology section will introduce the corpus tool used in the empirical section. The empirical section will cover the analysis of the media corpus and the results are summed up in the conclusion.

## 1. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF PANDEMICS

Since January of 2020, COVID-19 has been a heavily covered topic in media outlets all over the world. In scholarly literature it has been recognized that news is often politicized, but at the time of writing there are too few research articles to persuasively support this claim with regard to COVID-19. However, in the past there have been other epidemic outbreaks and it is possible to draw parallels with diseases like the “mad cow disease” (BSE), AIDS, and SARS. As COVID-19 is from the same family of viruses and resembles SARS, this literature review will focus on what has previously been found out about the media representation of the two diseases, generally and with regard to politicization.

### 1.1 Representation of SARS

Previous studies have demonstrated that during the outbreak of SARS western media created a socio-cultural difference between ‘us’ and the ‘Other’. Joye (2010) investigated two Belgian television news broadcasts (VRT and VTM) with Critical Discourse Analysis in order to find out how Belgian news represented the epidemic. The final results revealed that Belgian media excluded SARS related events from their initial coverage and the news reflected a Euro-American centered world order. The period of silence in the news was an ideological step to categorize China as the “unknown, communist ‘Other’” (Joye 2010: 592). Also, at that time a news value, proximity, was missing – the virus was perceived to be merely China’s issue with no relevance in the Belgian media.

Leung and Huang (2007) conducted a study in which they analyzed how the media of five different countries (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and Singapore) depict the Other (China and Vietnam) in their SARS related news. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were used to investigate *The Washington Post*, *The Times*, *The Globe & Mail*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Western online news (selected through the Lexis-Nexis database),

and the magazine *Newsweek*. The results showed that China and Vietnam handled the outbreak differently, which affected the news coverage by the foreign media. China was portrayed as the adverse Other, while Vietnam had no such reputation. Articles with negative tones were published about China and the country was blamed for the spread of the virus to the rest of the world because of how unethically it handled SARS.

Washer (2004) researched how SARS was portrayed in the UK newspapers from 16 March to 13 April 2003, using social representations of already existing works about HIV/AIDS and Ebola. Qualitative research software ATLAS/ti 4.2 was used to compare the results to previous researchers' work on Ebola. One significant difference between the SARS and Ebola coverage was that in the representation of SARS the media targeted certain individuals who were blamed for the outbreak. In addition, the theme of economy was present in the reporting of SARS, while Ebola did not have a major effect on the economy on a global scale. Washer (2004) argues that many outbreaks follow a similar pattern, namely the mechanism of Othering. According to the study, both Ebola and SARS were portrayed by the UK media as something that will not reach there, because Africa and China (the 'Other') are so different from the British ('us') (Washer 2004).

All three research articles focus on different aspects of how SARS is represented in the media and the broadcast news of different countries. One of the common tendencies in the Western media was treating SARS as something distant. Othering was revealed to occur in many texts as media outlets used the disease to criticize China. As the different studies used different methodologies, it is interesting that they reached quite similar results. Another similarity found in the studies was that no matter what disease was spreading around (COVID-19, SARS and Ebola), the media found someone to blame for the outbreak. From the perspective of methodology, perhaps the most thorough study is that of Leung and

Huang's (2007) who have used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. This can help to provide a more complete evaluation as the strengths of one type of data are balanced out by the weaknesses of another.

## **1.2 Representation of COVID-19**

There is not much research on media representations of COVID-19 at the time of writing. Most research on discourses has tended to focus on social media. However, there are a few previous studies on COVID-19 coverage already that use various methodological approaches, both qualitative and quantitative.

The study of Hart et al (2020) explores the politicization level in COVID-19 news in U.S newspapers and televised network news from March to May 2020. The `quanteda` package in R was used in the selection of the data set – news broadcasts are taken from ABC, CBS and NBC and newspaper articles from *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The database included 22,111 stories, of which 13,820 stories mention COVID-19 at least once and 6,985 at least three times. The research focused on the 6,985 stories in the database that mention COVID-19 at least three times.

In order to further examine the data for politicization, Hart et al (2020) used quantitative analysis method adopted by Chinn et al (2020), which is a dictionary-based approach. Dictionary-based approach in this study examines data through word frequency counts. Because of the extensive time frame, general dictionaries were used in order to identify political actors, with terms like “conservative”, “Republican”, “progressive”, “Democrat”, because the mentioned political actors change over time (Hart et al 2020). In addition to the general dictionaries, the study also developed its own specialized dictionaries

for the words used to refer to COVID-19, scientists and politicians of both parties within their corpus. Both the general dictionaries and the COVID-19 targeted dictionaries were used to measure politicization by the frequency that news articles mention political actors and scientists. The authors confirm that there are different patterns in newspaper and network news coverage. The politicization is higher in newspapers and politicians appear in their coverage more frequently than scientists, whereas network news coverage is less politicized and the appearance of politicians and scientists is more equal (Hart et al 2020).

Similarly, Abbas (2020) aimed to find out how the news of COVID-19 is used for political and ideological reasons. He analyzed the coronavirus news reports from the US's *The New York Times* (two articles) and China's *Global Times* (two articles) according to the three main discourse structures (macrostructure, superstructure and microstructure) in van Dijk's news schemata framework. The analysis was based on the following three questions listed by van Dijk (1991): How is the topical information organized in the text? What tends to be given importance, what information is presented first, and what is last? Which news schema categories are emphasized, and why?

Abbas (2020) states that both newspapers give more importance to the negative COVID-19 stories. In the analyzed articles of *The New York Times* and *Global Times* the notion of the negative Other is present. *The New York Times* writes about the propaganda of the Communist Party in China, condemns its shortcomings in providing people with medical supplies and its ways of controlling the expansion of the pandemic. Likewise, *Global Times* emphasized the negative stories about COVID-19 in the United States, for example, the US's national public health agency and the US government under Trump's administration are described as slow and unprofessional in their response to the outbreak (Abbas 2020).

The qualitative research method, however, raises some questions about the validity of the author's claims. Abbas (2020) has chosen only two articles to analyze from both newspapers. It has not been explained with what method and how he picked out specifically these four articles and not some others. He might have deliberately chosen the politicized ones and in that case, the results cannot be generalized to say that the pandemic is used in the news for political reasons.

Zhang and Shaw's (2020) purpose was to find out how the outbreak of COVID-19 and its management in China is reported in the UK media in general and on the Internet. They focused on online editions of three news sources: *The Guardian*, the *BBC* and *The Daily Mail*, which all target different readerships in the UK and have differing political and social outlooks. The scholars built a 20-week corpus, which was studied using sentiment analysis (coded manually) and thematic analysis (with data analysis software NVivo). Zhang and Shaw (2020) note that the first purpose for the selected newspapers is to provide information on the virus, yet both investigations reveal tendencies from which some are common and some are different. Despite being very different newspapers, the themes and topics are not very different from each other – they all reflect fear and accusations towards China. This can partially be explained by the general (anti-foreign) political climate in the UK, which influences the public opinion towards China and makes media organizations cover their stories in a way that would be appealing to their target audiences. The differences lie in the ways of discussing and presenting those topics.

Zhang and Shaw (2020) claim that the wealthy and well-educated readers of the quality media (*The Guardian* and the *BBC*) are provided with more balanced reports on the virus and China's handling of the virus, which results in having a more neutral view of China. Lower income/education level readers of the tabloid (*The Daily Mail*), on the other hand,

receive sensational news and may be encouraged to develop a negative opinion on China. The research confirmed that *The Daily Mail* covers fewer political concerns than *The Guardian*, which emphasizes a politically oriented selection of themes (Zhang and Shaw 2020).

As can be seen from the few studies, the initial research on COVID-19 pandemic shows the presence of Othering, similar to that of SARS coverage, especially with regard to China in Western newspapers. Chinese papers also other the USA. This process is already political. Thus, although most of the studies were not explicitly about politicization, associating the pandemic with other countries is political in nature. This result was achieved by both qualitative and quantitative methods and can thus be seen as relatively reliable. The study by Hart et al (2020) explicitly showed that COVID-19 coverage was more politicized in newspapers than broadcast news. This justifies taking a closer look at how two US newspapers with contrasting ideological perspectives treat the pandemic.

Previous research has shown that the media influences the public's emotions and opinions on important topics like epidemics and pandemics. In several countries the phenomenon of Othering occurred during the media's representation of SARS and even COVID-19. This is why emotional vocabulary is also one of the topics of interest in the present thesis. Additionally, research about the representation of COVID-19 has shown that readers of the quality media have access to more neutral information than readers of the tabloids. For that reason, two quality newspapers are chosen in the present study to test whether the news coverage is neutral or emotional.

At the time of writing no thorough study was found about the politicization of coronavirus that would be based on a comparative analysis. *The New York Times* has previously been analyzed in research papers, but *The Wall Street Journal*, one of the most

read business newspapers, has not yet been analyzed although it also covers news of the pandemic. There is no research about whether the politicization in news has decreased or increased in the United States during the second wave and election time in contrast to the first wave in spring. Different methods were used in the studies, but compared to qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis has proved itself to be more thorough in working with large quantity of data. Therefore, it will be used in this study to compare the representation of COVID-19 in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in the time frames of April and October 2020.

## 2. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Method

In order to gather the corpus for the present thesis the online editions of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* were accessed in November and December of 2020. The articles were gathered from both newspapers for April 2020 and October 2020. April was chosen because the first wave of coronavirus intensified during this period of time and October was chosen because it was the pre-election period in the USA and this might lead to more obvious politicization. This thesis finds answers to the main research question and the sub-questions:

1. How is COVID-19 represented in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* during the months of April and October in 2020?

2. Is the representation emotional and is the use of emotion connected to politics?

The keywords used to gather the articles were *coronavirus*, which is the virus' common name used by people, and *COVID-19*, which is its official name. The initial corpus included 6 390 articles from all of the searches. To limit the corpus, only articles which mentioned the virus more than once and which appeared in the section 'politics' were picked out. COVID-19 news under other sections like economy, sport, health, etc., were left out in order to focus on the politics-related news. *The New York Times* published 39 articles in April and 99 articles in October, whereas *The Wall Street Journal* published 81 articles in April and 72 articles in October. This resulted in total of 291 articles (349,071 words). All texts were downloaded as PDF files and then converted to plain text (.txt) files for analysis. This study is conducted using Sketch Engine.

Sketch Engine, created in 2003, is a corpus tool and a text analysis software. The core software and the web service include a large number of pre-loaded immediately

accessible corpora, but also tools for installing or creating one's own corpora. For this thesis, I created and uploaded my own corpora. The program will help to examine the representation of coronavirus as it has useful tools for finding recurring patterns in texts. The Sketch Engine core software has several features for analysing different aspects of the corpus, including word sketch, word sketch difference, concordance, thesaurus, wordlist, n-grams and keywords (Kilgariff et al 2014).

Word sketch is a tool that gives a one page overview of a word's grammatical and collocational behaviour in the corpus. Word sketch difference enables the user to compare collocations of lemma, word forms and subcorpora. Concordance is a tool which can find words, phrases, tags, documents, text types or corpus structures, allowing the user to see their context in a form of a concordance. This analysis is based on the word sketch, concordance and wordlist features. The word sketch feature is the main tool of analysis. However, the concordance tool provides the possibility of moving from the word sketch to the actual context of use and thus to check the correctness of interpretations. This way, the analysis combines elements of both quantitative and qualitative analysis: a quantitative picture of the data is created while also checking the accuracy of interpretations by going back to the actual context of use.

The corpus of *The New York Times* articles in April includes 57,067 words, and the corpus of October includes 147,011 words. The corpus of WSJ articles in April has the word count of 79,786 and 65,207 in October. The combined corpora of the study have the word count of 349,071, which can be considered quite small for quantitative analysis, but it makes it possible to identify trends that can be tested in further studies.

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Word count in April</b>	<b>Word count in October</b>	<b>In total</b>
The New York Times	57,067	147,011	349,071
The Wall Street Journal	79,786	65,207	

**Table 1.** Table of the corpora's word count

In order to measure the representation and the possibility of politicization in the selected newspaper articles, these following aspects will be assessed: usage of emotion words and Othering. There is no definitive set of criteria for recognizing emotion words, but a key feature is their deployment in rhetoric and narrative, which are “ways of talking about things, ways of constructing the sense of events, and orienting to normative and moral orders, to responsibility and blame, intentionality and social evaluation” (Edwards 1999: 279). Emotion words are terms that refer to anger, surprise, fear, and also metaphors of different concepts, for example ‘blind with rage’, which belongs to a set of anger metaphors. Rather than focusing on the events in the external world emotion here is studied as discursive phenomena (Edwards 1999).

Through such language it is also possible to find the phenomenon Othering (Edelman 1985). This can heavily shape people's opinions on individuals and groups (e.g countries), especially in a negative way, because usually it shows that they do not fit in within the norms of a social group.

## 2.1 Analysis of COVID-19 Coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*

Top 10 words in <i>The New York Times</i> in April						
	'coronavirus'		'pandemic'		'president'	
1	outbreak	13	coronavirus	11	be	14
2	pandemic	11	have	9	have	14
3	crisis	9	be	7	say	8
4	be	8	affect	2	do	4
5	force	8	fast-moving	2	appear	3
6	have	6	say	2	deny	3
7	case	5	upend	2	continue	2
8	restriction	5	hit	1	defend	2
9	spread	4	ignore	1	select	2
10	testing	4	prevent	1	stage	2

**Table 2.** 10 most frequent words appearing with the keywords in *The New York Times* in April (word classes are combined together).

In the 39 *The New York Times* articles in the April 2020 corpus, the word *coronavirus* is identified as a noun 176 times. *Coronavirus* acts 89 times as a modifier of nouns. The word choices that can be seen in the first column in Table 2 indicate significant trends: we see the use of emotional words emphasizing the rarity and impact of the virus (*crisis, outbreak, pandemic, fast-moving*). These words that help build news values related to rarity and intensity are more frequent than words that describe medical response to the crisis (*testing, vaccine*). This is quite predictable in the period when the pandemic emerged as the leading public emergency. Another interesting phenomenon is the presence of words that show the force of the pandemic (*force, upend, hit*) and emotion is created by the use of words evoking war (*restriction, defend*). There is also some indication of the potentially politicized nature of the response as we also see verbs like *ignore* and *deny*.

Although the list of once modified words contains emotional words like *intrigue* and *debate* (which show controversy around the virus), the majority of vocabulary indicates different policy discussions and medical responses to the crisis (*death, infection*). The



However, *pandemic* is used as a noun 93 times. From Table 2 we can see that most frequently it acts as a subject for the most common verbs *have* and *be*. The corpus shows that the pandemic is represented in the articles as an agent who performs strong actions (by using verbs like *upend* and *shutter*). Many of the words, again, evoke the war metaphor (*hit*, *reach*, *upend*). *Pandemic* as object appears with a wide variety of verbs (e.g. *have*, *treat*, *prevent*) but the most interesting one is *combat*, as it emphasizes the aggressive nature of COVID-19. The keyword also has modifiers, *coronavirus* being the most frequent one. Although only one or two times, the pandemic is associated with unexpectedness (*fast-moving*) and fatality (*deadly*, *bad*). The word *partisan* appears with *pandemic* as adjective predicate 1 time. Thus, an overly political word appears only once in the collocations. Other aspects of possible politicization are more indirect.

*President* is included in the analysis because the response to the pandemic is related to the role of the executive. The president's actions directly affect the pandemic response. *President* is used as a noun 164 times, of which it appears as subject with verbs 85 times. Thus, the president is given more agency than the pandemic, as is to be expected in a country facing a crisis. The most frequent verbs used with *president* as the subject are the widely used verbs, like *have*, *be*, *say*, *do* (frequency is seen in Table 2), which show no excessive emotions that would indirectly praise or criticize Mr. Trump. However, we also see more loaded verbs like *deny*, *select*, *stage*, *want*. Here the most interesting verb is *deny*, in view of President Trump's controversial views on the pandemic. It is actually surprising that this verb does not appear more frequently. In addition, there are several verbs only mentioned one time; although they do not appear very often, among them we can spot emotional verbs (*attack*, *fight* and *battle*) associated with the president that evoke violence.

Mostly the verbs with *president* as object are quite neutral (*be*, *talk*, *sit*, *say*), there are words that raise interest, like *force* and *urge*. *Force* is used in the context of the politician

Ms. Pelosi wanting to force the president to tell only the truth – Trump is known for spreading false information about the virus. There is also an instance where *president* is modified with the word *grim-faced*. The concordance tool shows us the context – this adjective was used in the article to let people know that Donald Trump had realised his mistake of talking about coronavirus as a mere flu only after death rates went seriously up. Another eye-catching modifier is *wartime*. The concordance tool is of help here as well, as it shows us that the modifier is criticism towards Donald Trump because he tries to brand himself as a valuable wartime president next to celebrated wartime presidents, like Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Frequency of top 10 words in <i>The New York Times</i> in October						
	'coronavirus'		'pandemic'		'president'	
1	pandemic	23	coronavirus	23	be	97
2	test	17	have	12	have	92
3	case	13	be	10	vice	60
4	be	12	end	4	say	41
5	diagnosis	11	fight	4	former	21
6	infection	11	affect	2	do	14
7	response	10	control	2	make	11
8	vaccine	10	describe	2	continue	7
9	crisis	8	manage	2	test	7
10	force	7	take	2	take	6

**Table 3.** 10 most frequent words appearing with the keywords in *The New York Times* in October (word classes are combined together).

In the October corpus of *The New York Times*, *coronavirus* is used as a noun 363 times. In 183 cases it acts as a modifier. The most frequently used modified nouns by *coronavirus* are seen in Table 3. Here, the vocabulary is mostly related to the medical concerns of the pandemic, to give us the information about vaccines, infections, cases and tests. However, words like *crisis*, *force* and *outbreak* convey the seriousness of the situation, although these strong emotional words have moved down the list of frequency, probably

because by October people had got used to the crisis. Very subtly the virus is connected to politics, as some less frequently modified nouns include words like *relief*, *threat*, *politics*, and *Trump*. *Deadly* is the only modifier of *coronavirus* that has been used 2 times. *Coronavirus* is used as subject with the verbs *be* (12 times) and *have* (6 times), which are the most frequent verbs for the keyword. These are followed by the verbs *surge*, *cause* and *rage* that occur only a few times. Even though there is one overly emotional verb (*rage*) and we can also associate the verb *surge* with uncontrollable force and thus the threatening nature of the virus, other verbs in this category are quite neutral and show no emotional pattern.

It has also been an object in a sentence with aggressive verbs, like *battle* (3 times) and *fight* (2 times), again conveying war metaphors while making it look like the pandemic is a war that the world has to defeat. Another reason why war metaphors are so frequently used is because wars are an inevitable part of human experience. Some people have had a first-hand experience fighting in war and even more people have had extensive second-hand experience, for example learning about historical wars in school, reading about present-day wars in the newspaper or receiving information about it through social media or television (Flusberg et al 2018). War metaphors also help to stress that the war requires victims and special measures.

*Pandemic* appears as a noun 202 times from which 48 times it acts as subject. The most common verbs are brought out in Table 3, and the word pattern overall is not particular, containing words like *become*, *pose*, *bring*, *put* and *find*. *Pandemic* appears 31 times as object, most frequently with the verbs *fight* and *end* (frequency can be seen in Table 3). The list of once occurring verbs shows that the pandemic is portrayed as an agent who performs powerful actions that, again, are associated with war and violence (*rage*, *combat*). Using this variety of emotional verbs makes people alarmed about the virus even seven months after the initial outbreak in the USA.

The following once appearing modifiers of *pandemic* are worth mentioning: *uncontrolled, swine, influenza, flu, deadly* and *global*. References to swine flu and influenza compare the coronavirus to other diseases and remind readers of the hardships that people have faced with past pandemics. Also, the adjective *global* ensures readers that the coronavirus is not just an issue in the United States, but in the whole world. However, in the months studied, with the word sketch tool there is no indication in *The New York Times* of the virus being Othered and associated with China, for example. The only possible Othering that can be seen is the reference to swine flu, but it is not presented in explicit connection with China.

*President* appears 896 times as a noun. This is used significantly more than the last keywords *pandemic* and *coronavirus* put together, showing that during this period more emphasis is put on the political aspects of handling the virus. 422 times it acts as subject with a wide variety of verbs, from which the most frequent ones are listed in Table 3 (*have, be, say, do, etc.*). One infrequent word seems worth noting – perhaps the usage of the verb *refuse* (3 times) shows the headstrong mentality of Donald Trump, including in the context of the pandemic. The concordance confirms this, as two of the mentions criticize the President for refusing to acknowledge the threat of the pandemic and for refusing to participate remotely in the debate with Mr. Biden.

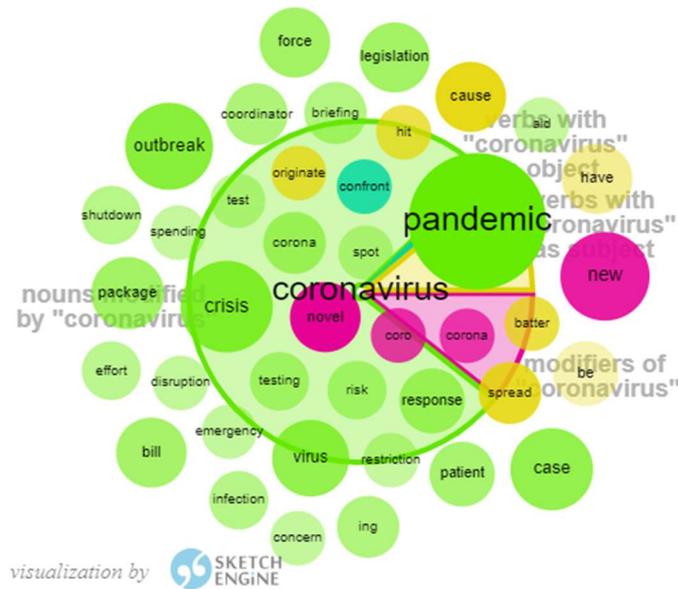
*President* is also used as object to common verbs (*say* and *be*), but the most noteworthy is *hospitalize*. It is surprising that this verb occurs alongside *president* only 3 times, as October was the month when Donald Trump tested positive for COVID-19. Predictably, the noun is modified by political vocabulary, like *vice, former* (frequency in Table 3), *other* (4 times), *American* and *Republican* (3 times).

Top 10 words in <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> in April						
	'coronavirus'		'pandemic'		'president'	
1	pandemic	63	coronavirus	68	have	29
2	crisis	19	have	10	say	13
3	outbreak	19	build	7	be	12
4	new	17	be	6	former	12
5	case	13	virus	6	vice	12
6	virus	10	corona	5	take	4
7	package	8	say	5	do	3
8	force	7	combat	2	make	3
9	legislation	7	global	2	accuse	2
10	novel	7	ongoing	2	tweet	2

**Table 4.** 10 most frequent words appearing with the keywords in *The Wall Street Journal* in April (word classes are combined together).

In the month of April, *coronavirus* appears as a noun in *The Wall Street Journal* corpus 327 times. It is used most (237 times) as a modifier of nouns. Like in *The New York Times* corpus, *coronavirus* appears modifying words that express rarity and also words that help to pass on important information about the virus (*pandemic, crisis, outbreak, case, patient*). In addition, some infrequent nouns (*emergency, infection, shutdown, risk*) help to represent the pandemic as a matter of great concern. Of these words, *emergency* and *shutdown* are quite emotional. Modifiers (*new* and *novel*) of the keyword, once again, emphasize that the virus is newly discovered and that there is no immunity to it.

*Coronavirus* acts as subject most commonly with unemotional verbs like *have* and *be*, but even with infrequent emotional verbs *batter, hit* and *originate* (2 times). Of these words, *batter* and *hit* both convey violence and war. The concordance tool shows that *originate* is used to convey the message that the Coronavirus started spreading from China, therefore here we have the first detected example of Othering. However, the word itself is neutral and thus the connection with China is not presented in alarmist terms.



**Figure 2.** Word sketch visualization of the words that occur with *coronavirus* in the WSJ in April. Green shows nouns modified by „coronavirus“, pink shows modifiers of „coronavirus“, yellow shows verbs with „coronavirus“ as subject, and blue verbs with „coronavirus“ as object.

*Pandemic* is used in a total of 180 times as a noun, from which 95 times it is modified by nouns. Although most frequently used words, again, are words such as *coronavirus*, *virus*, *ongoing* and *global*, the emotional tone can be found from the variety of once used words, like *deadly* and *horrible*, which obviously represent the severity of the virus. Once mentioned were also the words *rights* and *voting*, which have political undertone, as virus containment measures were often perceived to be in conflict with individual rights and the process of voting during the upcoming elections. Yet the fact that these nouns only appears once suggests that there was no explicit contrasting of health and rights.

The most frequent verbs to which *pandemic* appears as subject are *have*, *build* and *be* (listed in Table 4.) – the pattern is completely unemotional. The pattern of once used verbs being more emotionally loaded is evident here as well, for example with words like *spark*, *ravage*, *upend*, *wipe*, *affect* and *hit*. These verbs, especially dramatic ones like *ravage*, indicate the violence and aggressiveness of the pandemic. With *pandemic* as object there is

no pattern of repetition of a particular emotional verb, rather there is a great variety of different words. The war metaphor can be seen most – notable examples are *weaponizing* and *politicize*, which are both overly political words and have previously not showed up around the keywords.

*President* appears as a noun 198 times, from which 110 times it is used as a subject for verbs. It is to be expected that the most common verbs are neutral (*have, say, be*), but the rarer verbs indicate strong, and at times unpopular political actions (*undercut, veto, clash, halt*), as well as words usual in political discussions (*promote, voice, argue*). The verb list of *president* as object shows that some verbs express president Trump’s negative actions (e. g. *criticize, argue, interrupt, tweet*), as he is a very straightforward person who speaks without deep deliberation, often over social media. Its modifiers are mostly from political vocabulary: *vice* and *former* (frequency in Table 4.), *Democratic* and *U.S.* (2 times), *Republican* (1 time).

Top 10 words in <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> in October						
	'coronavirus'		'pandemic'		'president'	
1	pandemic	18	coronavirus	18	vice	50
2	case	6	virus	6	be	34
3	package	6	have	4	have	31
4	virus	6	begin	3	say	31
5	vaccine	5	covid-19	3	former	23
6	infection	4	spur	3	test	8
7	response	4	be	2	do	7
8	test	4	control	2	tweet	5
9	contract	3	end	2	lead	4
10	relief	3	take	2	criticize	3

**Table 5.** 10 most frequent words appearing with the keywords in *The New York Times* in April (word classes are combined together).

In October, the mentions of *coronavirus* has decreased compared to April as it appears 149 times as a noun in the articles of *The Wall Street Journal* corpus. It acts 89 times as a modifier of nouns. In this case, the words describing medical details of the pandemic

(*case, vaccine, test*) are of greater importance than emotional words. This suggests that the virus had lost its novelty and the media was, rather, focusing on the everyday aspects of dealing with the pandemic, both in the medical setting and in the political establishment. *Coronavirus* appearing as object with verbs shows the reappearance of the trend of using emotional words related to war metaphors (*fight, combat*) that we also saw in the April corpus.

*Pandemic* is identified as a noun in 114 cases. Modifiers of *pandemic* (35 in total) are mostly unemotional (*coronavirus, Covid-19, virus*), and some hint at the wide impact of the disease (*global, widespread*). *Pandemic* appears 28 times as a subject with verbs – there is a number of emotional words of considerable intensity in the list, like *dominate, upend, hurt, spark*. The keyword is also used as object with infrequently occurring verbs, like *control, handle, fight*. *Fight*, for example, falls into the category of the reappearing war metaphor.

*President* appears as a noun 396 times, which is significantly less than in the coverage of *The New York Times* in October. However, the usage of this noun has increased compared to the articles of *The Wall Street Journal* in April. The importance of political matters rose in October because it was the pre-election period and also because president Trump himself tested positive for COVID-19. *President* appeared 195 times as a subject with verbs. The most frequently used verbs appear to be unemotional (*be, have, say*) and it can be understood that the newspaper wished to stay neutral. However, among once used words some emotional words (*criticize, accuse, defend*) attract attention. An interesting verb is *tweet* that is mentioned several times because Donald Trump caused trouble on the social media platform Twitter as he tried to express his political power by posting false claims.

The wordlist tool allows us to see many interesting patterns in the case of nouns. In the April corpus of *The New York Times* at the start of the frequency list (top 10) there are nouns from both, political and healthcare vocabulary. In April, the most frequent noun in *The New York Times* is *mr.* with 518 mentions. Second noun in the frequency list is *Trump* (408 mentions) and *coronavirus* with already significantly less frequently (246 mentions). In *The Wall Street Journal*, *Trump* falls on the first place with 722 mentions and *coronavirus* places second with 666 mentions. Here we see a bit of a different pattern as in the 10 most frequent nouns only two are related to the pandemic (*coronavirus* 2<sup>nd</sup> and *virus* 9<sup>th</sup>). These results are surprising because in April the virus was still a relatively new issue and the frequency of medical nouns would have been expected to be higher.

Wordlist frequency of *The New York Times* corpus in October shows us that like in April, the first two nouns are still *mr.* (2,016 mentions) and *Trump* (1,771 mentions). However, the third place here belongs to *president*, and *coronavirus* has fallen to the eight place as the only word in the top 10 that represents nouns related to the pandemic. The most frequent noun in *The Wall Street Journal* corpus is *Trump* (1,090 mentions) and the second most used noun is *mr.* (1,037 mentions). *Coronavirus* (7<sup>th</sup>) and *covid-19* (9<sup>th</sup>) are the only two pandemic-related nouns in the top 10 of the wordlist. Compared to April, the infrequency of nouns related to coronavirus in both newspapers could indicate that as the virus had already been around for many months and there were other topics to cover, which probably had a higher news value than coronavirus-related reports. For example, in October the president election process received a lot of attention from media.

The wordlist shows interesting results with the nouns *Wuhan* and *China*. In April, *China* was mentioned 53 times and *Wuhan* 23 times in *The New York Times* corpus. In *The Wall Street Journal* *China* was mentioned 56 times. In October, *China* occurred 18 times in *The New York Times* and 10 times in *The Wall Street Journal*. The concordance tool helps

to find out if we can say that during these months Othering has been used by the American newspapers. In April the virus was still a shock to people, and by that time it had spread widely across the world. Although there are not very evident cases of Othering in the corpus, one instance is found from *The New York Times* where a whole article focuses on the possibility that Trump administration officials may have sent out spies to find evidence to connect the coronavirus to the Wuhan labs. The article suggests that “President Trump escalates a public campaign to blame China for the pandemic”.

There are no emotional claims by the newspapers that would blame China or call it a “China virus”, but some articles do mention that the virus originates from there. Thus, in most cases the Othering came from Mr. Trump not from the newspapers. When China is mentioned in a negative tone, it is because the papers pass on Donald Trump’s claims, thoughts and actions.

## CONCLUSION

News is important in people's everyday life because it informs us about important events and it also has the power to potentially influence us and our view of the world. However, news does not bring us completely neutral information, as it is inevitably positioned in relation to what is covered. The positioning is affected by corporate media owners, journalists and language. Politics and pandemics/epidemics are good examples for showing media's influential side as it can form people's opinions and therefore give rise to controversies. This is why it is important to look into the media representation of the coronavirus pandemic.

Previous research about SARS and COVID-19 representation in news shows that news tends to show these diseases as something distant. Othering appeared mostly when western media articles used the viruses to criticize China and its ways of handling the alarming situation. Likewise, the research of COVID-19 representation discovered that Chinese papers used the phenomenon of Othering towards the USA. It was also found that newspaper coverage tends to be more politicized than that of broadcast news.

The present thesis looked at *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in April and October 2020 to find out how COVID-19 is represented in the two newspapers and whether the representation was emotional. A further aim was to consider if this use of emotion had a political undertone, positioning readers in a specific way in relation to American politics. The combined corpora of the study had the word count of 349,071. The analysis was conducted with the Sketch Engine corpus analysis tool.

The analysis found that the vocabulary occurring in both newspapers was mostly neutral. Around the keywords, most frequently appearing words tended to be, for example, common verbs that we need in our everyday conversations, and also medical vocabulary.

However, more infrequently, emotion words did find their way into the coverage of COVID-19 news. Although it was unobtrusive, the use of emotion vocabulary was consistent throughout the analysis. More precisely, the study found significant trends, like the use of war metaphors and vocabulary that emphasizes the rarity and seriousness of the virus, which already are a form of politicization.

In the coverage of both newspapers, the use of nouns from political vocabulary was the most frequent, followed by pandemic-related vocabulary. In October, this was expected as it was the month before presidential elections, but the results of April were surprising because the virus was still quite a new issue and nevertheless political words were more frequent than words relating to the pandemic.

Although COVID-19 is associated with originating from China, Othering is not prominently present in either of the papers. This result different from the findings of previous research. When in some instances criticizing or politicization occurred, it was mostly connected to president Trump's words and actions. Although *The New York Times* (more liberal) and *The Wall Street Journal* (more conservative) have contrasting ideological views, it can be said that as both papers are quality newspapers, they aim to stay as neutral as possible in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are some potential limitations of the study. Primarily, as the corpus is relatively small, in order to get more reliable and precise findings, future researchers should create a bigger corpus with more articles. Another idea for further studies would be to focus more on a corpus feature (e.g. concordance) which would allow to examine the context in depth, instead of focusing on word frequencies.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Hanna-Liisa Kaun**

**Representation of coronavirus in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*  
Koroonaviiruse kujutamine ajalehtedes *The Wall Street Journal* ja *The New York Times***

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 36

Annotatsioon:

2020. aastal hakkas levima koroonaviirus COVID-19, mis on meedias ülemaailmselt saanud palju tähelepanu. Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida koroonaviiruse kujutamist kahes Ameerika Ühendriikide ajalehes, *The New York Times*'is ja *The Wall Street Journal*'is. Uurimistöö korpus koosneb 291 artiklist. Artiklid sisestati Sketch Engine tarkvarasse, mille abil viidi läbi korpuse analüüs.

Sissejuhatuses tutvustatakse uudiste olemust ning tuuakse välja erinevaid faktoreid mille põhjal otsustatakse mis uudiseid on kajastatamist väärt. Esimene peatükk annab ülevaate, kuidas meedias on kujutatud SARS ja COVID-19 pandeemiat ning tuuakse välja nendega seoses erinevaid uuringuid. Teine peatükk kirjeldab korpust lähemalt ning tutvustab analüüsimeetodit. Seejärel viiakse läbi korpuse analüüs ning tuuakse välja tulemused. Kokkuvõttes kommenteeritakse tulemusi ning antakse soovitusi edaspidisteks uuringuteks.

Korpuse analüüsist selgus, et mõlemad ajalehed hoidsid võimalikult neutraalset tooni, kuid tuli välja ka see, et vähesel määral on kasutatud emotsionaalset sõnavara, mis vihjas koroonaviiruse tõsidusele ja ohtlikkusele (nt sõjametafooride kasutamise kaudu).

Võtmesõnad: koroonaviirus, meediadiskursus, poliitiline diskursus, korpusanalüüs, USA poliitika

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