

9-6-2023

News frames for COVID-19 – a comparison of Australian (Australian broadcasting corporation) and Vietnamese (tuoi tre online) online news services in two key weeks in 2020

Viet T. Le

Lelia Green
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

[10.1177/1329878X231198317](https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231198317)

This is an Authors Accepted Manuscript version of an article published by SAGE in *Media International Australia*. The published version is available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231198317>

Le, V. T., & Green, L. (2023). News frames for COVID-19 – a comparison of Australian (Australian broadcasting corporation) and Vietnamese (tuoi tre online) online news services in two key weeks in 2020. *Media International Australia*. Advance online publication. Copyright © 2023 (SAGE). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231198317>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/3168>

News frames for COVID-19 – A comparison of
Australian (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and
Vietnamese (Tuoi Tre Online) online news services in
two key weeks in 2020

Viet Tho Le & Lelia Green

Introduction

Building on prior experience of pandemic threats, Briggs and Nichter (2009) argue that public health crises like COVID-19 are an opportunity for different stakeholders (citizens, politicians, journalists, and medical experts) to express power through the construction and circulation of knowledge. This proposition is explored below through interrogation of the central role played by public sphere media in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic through explaining government policy, discussing the biology of the illness, highlighting the relevance of individuals' actions and documenting audience interpretations of, and responses to, risks posed by the virus (Lima et al., 2020).

Online news services acquire greater prominence when citizens seek to address health concerns, especially when people's movements are restricted. The media's pivotal role enables citizens to search for relevant data; create, adapt and use health-based information to share experiences within a public debate on the politics of the pandemic; and advocate for changes in health-related policy (Petersen et al., 2019). Such public sphere dynamics were also evident in the Ebola, SARS and MERS outbreaks. While countries have different governance mechanisms, Shaw et al. (2020) argue that a few governance decisions in respective countries can make a significant difference.

Both Australia and Vietnam were success stories in their handling of the early wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Moloney S and Moloney K 2020; Buckley 2022), even though they have very different political regimes and media systems. In Vietnam, mainstream media are constructed as ideological apparatuses to serve the Communist Party of Vietnam (CVP) (Heng, 2001). The media are, therefore, restricted in reporting news related to Vietnamese politics (author 1). In their response to COVID-19, Vietnamese people increased their use of personal digital media, including social media, to exchange news about the pandemic (beyond the remit of this paper).

A similar pattern is evident in Australia where online news (including social media) became increasingly significant during the pandemic with 73 per cent of citizens saying they attended to these digital sources, followed by television (at 61 per cent) (Newman et al. 2021). Reflecting this, the proportion of people prioritising print sources in the period since 2018 declined by 16 percentage points to 20 per cent (Newman et al., 2021). Throughout these changes in the news environment however, Australia's publicly-funded broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), remained its most trusted news brands (Newman et al. 2021).

This paper examines the online versions of mainstream media to interrogate Australia's and Vietnam's governance of crisis communication around the COVID-19 pandemic. It investigates data collected from Tuoi Tre Online in Vietnam (TTO), and ABC Online in Australia (ABC), to compare coverage in two discrete weeks of particular relevance to these respective governments' handling of the pandemic. These online news services were chosen because each media organisation plays a vital role in either the Vietnamese and Australian public sphere, as indicated in audience reach. TTO is immensely popular in Vietnam with its editorial stance reflecting the ideology of the CVP, the country's sole political party. Meanwhile, ABC Online is the primary web presence of the ABC, a government-subsidised public broadcaster. It addresses a national audience and is widely used by Australians (Holland and Lewis 2021). Comparing the discursive connections made by these news organisations between government and medical authorities, and everyday people's experiences of the

pandemic, illuminates differences in authorities' handling of the crisis, and ways in which citizens responded. This study offers insights into how different communication systems framed the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, and frame health crises in general. Such insights may contribute to an understanding of relationships between media framing and the political economy of news coverage.

Framing as a way of seeing the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic put pressure on journalists to mediate and explain the virus: to determine the 'frame' to be used for discussing the pandemic and communicating with the public. Initially developed by Goffman (1959), framing addresses how an individual presents themselves before a particular audience in a specific way. By extension, the media frame suggests how a reader might think about events/issues and is built by selecting aspects of the news to highlight, and others to downplay (Entman 1993). Therefore, "frames not only enhance understanding; they influence opinions" (Berinsky and Kinder 2006, p. 654). Effectively, the media employs frames to predispose the audience to particular interpretations of events.

Politicians aim to persuade the media to adopt a politically-advantageous frame, since most voters are exposed to political knowledge via media coverage (Jungherr et al. 2019). The news media influence public perceptions of the relative importance of different topics (McCombs et al. 2011). Entman (2003) presents a two-way framing model in which frame effects are achieved in both top-down and bottom-up mode. One of these ways is through journalists producing news that reflects the thoughts and opinions of powerful people such as media owners, politicians and other opinion leaders. The bottom-up dynamic captures the public mood via polling and other outlets for citizens' opinions, including hearings and protests, showcasing popular viewpoints for the attention of media content producers. In Entman's (2003) model, the media acts as a social screen reflecting, balancing and aligning the public's, and leaders', priorities via media framing. The relative importance paid by media organisations to top-down or bottom-up influences reflects the socio-economic context and the media landscape of the cultural setting in which each news organisation operates.

Diverse approaches are evident in media responses to the initial COVID-19 outbreak. In liberal democracies, media discourses tend to focus on public health, national security, grassroots solidarity and people supporting each other in the face of a natural disaster. In single party political systems, such crises may prompt further centralisation of power, with the media promoting the government's preferred frame, positioning the citizenry as supportive of the authorities' policies. In both cases, a widespread health risk calls for a co-ordinated effort to ensure that government, health experts and media work together to manage the quality, and effective transmission, of relevant reporting. To minimise possible public confusion, Leach et al. (2010) suggest media should focus on "a particular interpretation of disease dynamics [...] and a particular version of response" (p. 372). Reflecting this, Pan and Meng (2016) identified differing media framing (see below) between the pre-crisis and post-crisis stages of the 2009 swine flu pandemic. Frames of health risk, societal problems, political/legal issues and prevention/health education were mainly used pre-epidemic, while the medical/scientific frame was more evident afterwards. In the context of infectious diseases and other health crises, where journalists are heavily reliant on health authorities, experts, and government sources (Holland et al. 2014), media framing may reveal governments' efforts to control both the message presented and the public response.

Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) analysed BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN, and People's Daily news outputs at the start of COVID-19, identifying emergent themes of Sinophobia, crime,

geopolitics, international relations, misinformation and fake news. In the case of Vietnam, La et al. (2020) observed that the rhetoric used in official Vietnamese press media reports about COVID-19 was frequently associated with war. This may reflect Vietnamese mainstream journalists' tendency to re-use words and phrases spoken by officials in their public pronouncements (Le 1998). Gallois (2020) suggests that Australian media uses negative emotion in its reporting, even when the story as a whole is about positive action. This is in line with Corcoran's (2006) view of Australian journalism as adopting a generic emotional framing.

Research questions and method

The research questions informing this paper are **RQ1:** *What were the main differences between ABC and TTO in terms of how they responded to COVID-19 at the start of 2020?*; and, **RQ2:** *How did each media organisation blend discourses of public health, warfare, national security and grassroots solidarity in their 2020 coverage of the COVID-19 crisis?*

ABC Online is the ABC's digital news service. Founded in 1932, the ABC is principally funded by the Australian government but retains editorial independence (Mackriell 1996). In 2018-19, the average monthly audience reach of ABC Online in Australia was 11 million people (ABC 2019). Alexa ranks ABC Online at 1,160 in global internet engagement and 24th in Australia. Meanwhile, TTO is an online version of the Tuoi Tre Newspaper published by the Hochiminh Communist Youth Union of Hochiminh City. TTO reaches 77.45 million page views per month, and aims for financial independence, but is subject to a system of controls emanating from inside the party and feeding down to editors-in-chief through weekly editorial meetings which aim to regulate editorial content (McKinley 2011; Grant 2013). Alexa ranks the news organisation 2,552 in global internet engagement and 19th in Vietnam. In September 2020, Vietnam's population was 97.5 million (Worldometer 2020b), and Australia's population was 25.6 million (Worldometer 2020a). Given this, the percentage of audience and pageviews offer a rough equivalence, reflecting the relative comparability of 19th and 24th in terms of national engagement across the two countries.

Having selected ABC Online and the digital TTO service for comparison, their online news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was compared to address the research questions. Two discrete weeks of particular relevance to each government's handling of the pandemic were identified as primary data sources. Week one included confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in each country: the foundation case of the pandemic outbreak. Week two was identified in retrospect as the national pinnacle for the first wave of the epidemic, articulated around the highest number of new cases in one day (in 2020) for each of the two countries. For Vietnam, the first week ran from 23-29 January, while the second week was from 28 July to 3 August (articulated around 29 July). For Australia, the first week was 25-31 January, while the second week, articulated around 31 July, ran from 26 July-1 August. The more intense a pandemic, the more dramatic the response demanded of and by public authorities (D'Auria and De Smet 2020). Public uncertainty around the risk posed by the virus built audience concern, raising media engagement (Nguyen 2020; Bernadas and Ilagan 2020).

The Vietnamese data (summarised in Table 1) was collected via a Google search using the keywords 'COVID-19 site:tuoitre.vn' with the timeframes of 23-29 January and 28 July-3 August. Meanwhile, the keywords 'COVID-19 site:abc.net.au' were used to specify comparable Australian data for the timeframes 25-31 January and 26 July-1 August. The Australian context tends to amalgamate the responses of State and Federal Governments, generically referring to these as 'government'. Two further keyword strands: 'coronavirus' and 'Wuhan Flu' were also used, as well as COVID-19, since these phrases have been used to refer

to the disease. At the data cleaning stage, researchers found themselves deleting unrelated items collected as a result of internal links referencing 'COVID-19', providing some comfort that the search was exhaustive.

The research uses thematic content analysis to investigate differences in reporting the substance, views, and style of relevant news items. Content analysis is defined as "the classification, tabulation, and evaluation of a body of conveyed material's primary symbols and themes in order to identify its meaning and probable effect" (Krippendorff 2004, pp. xvii). This approach has previously been used to explore the structure, purpose, and themes associated with media framing (Cissel 2012). McMillan (2000) identifies five major steps in the conduct of content analysis. She suggests that researchers: create research questions; select a sample; operationalise the coding units; code the data; and analyse and interpret the results. These are the five steps used in this paper. Comparative media framing is explored via Entman's (1993) suggestion that researchers pay attention to the "presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (p. 52). The Tables below factor in the proportionality of data relating to: particular categories of news (Table 1); sources cited in items collected (Table 2); and, frames used by journalists (Table 3). This allows comparison of the media outlets' relative reliance upon aspects of news coverage across the datasets (with caveats addressed in Discussion).

Taken together, the analytic strategies described above constitute a synthesis of inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning tends to move from the specific to the general (as with 'human interest' stories) and has been characterised as a 'bottom-up' approach (Hayes 2007, p. 48). In contrast, deductive reasoning takes a range of observations and tests them against specific parameters to form an overall conclusion, in what might be characterised as a 'top-down' process. According to Beaudoin (2007), a deductive approach "is especially useful when it comes to comparing news coverage between different news outlets" (2007, p. 511). Use of a deductive coding process, interpolated with existing scholarship around news framing, indicates five key frames used in news coverage about COVID-19. These five frames are: (i) 'Human Interest', which "bring[s] a human face or an emotional angle" (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000, p. 95); (ii) 'Attribution of Responsibility', which connects certain events and the accompanying consequences or solutions (An and Gower 2009); (iii) 'Morality', to emphasise religious and ethical issues (Bergmann, 1998; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000); (iv) Economic and Social Consequences, to identify the impact on individuals, institutions or nations, often triggering public interest (Graber and Dunaway 2017); and (v) 'Severity' (Beaudoin 2007), which emphasises the seriousness of a perceived threat (Rosenstock et al. 1988). These five frames structure the coding and analysis used to address RQ1: *What were the main differences between ABC and TTO in terms of how they responded to COVID-19 at the start of 2020?* and compares relevant news categories, sources quoted, and the framing employed. After completing the deductive coding cycle, where researchers sort data into categories suggested by relevant previous research (as cited above), researchers used inductive analysis to examine short phrases that relate specifics of media coverage to general findings which were subsequently examined in light of relevant literature. Inductive strategies support comprehension of an overall picture while retaining a specific focus on the data (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022).

Consideration of RQ2, *How did each media organisation blend discourses of public health, warfare, national security and grassroots solidarity in their 2020 coverage of the COVID-19 crisis?* highlights the way each news organisation mobilised distinct discursive

strands in covering the COVID-19 crisis. Particularly referencing the Attribution of Responsibility frame (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), discourses used incorporate a range of common sub-frames (An and Gower 2009). Liu (2018) suggests that the Attribution of Responsibility “encourages news users to hold others responsible for social problems” (p. 18), potentially predisposing audiences to judge specific social groupings as responding (in)appropriately to those problems. We interrogated differences between TTO’s and ABC’s use of Attribution of Responsibility via three sub-categories of potentially ‘responsible’ entities: (i) individuals and families, (ii) communities and organisations, and (iii) governments. These three sub-categories were employed only where there was a clear indication of a positive or negative attribution relating to one (or more) of the relevant entities. Where no such indication was evident, the story was coded as neutral. (Some examples of Attribution of Responsibility framing also prompted identification of a Human Rights Awareness frame in locating potential points of conflict between individuals and systems of governance.)

The first author, being bilingual, undertook the coding of both English-language and Vietnamese data following Fram’s constant comparison process (2013). Fram’s approach to analysis is well-established in qualitative research, including news and media research (e.g. Matthews 2022), while her foundational article has been cited more than 1,000 times in the first decade of publication (Google Scholar). Fram suggests no requirement for multiple coders or associated checks upon inter-coder reliability. She builds upon established approaches to the constant comparison of data while highlighting that O’Connor et al. (2008 p. 41) note “It is the time and the process of this constant comparison that determines whether the analysis is deductive and will produce a testable theory or whether the analysis is inductive and will build a theory for a particular context.” The process adopted in this article uses inductive analysis for within-country theorising and deductive analysis to test the theory that frames used in the different national contexts might indicate national differences in the governance of disasters.

Since the coding was done by one person, there was no inter-coder testing of outcomes. Further, the use of one coder helped ensure consistency of approach across the dataset, and codings were constantly checked against pre-existing categories drawn from relevant literature as the work progressed. Even given extensive rechecking, the coding process required almost no adjustment, indicating a robust application of coding parameters and a consistent use of the five frames. Also, both authors rigorously tested the data when drafting and revising the paper and deciding to cite key phrases from source materials to support the arguments made.

Results

The Google search for keywords relating to COVID-19 (etc., as above), omitted entries very similar to the items displayed. Additionally, the researchers deleted items that included a link to COVID-19 news stories, but which were not COVID-19 related themselves. After data cleansing, 430 items remained in the TTO dataset, and 344 in the ABC’s (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Categories of news coverage collected from the TTO and ABC sites in the selected weeks

		TTO		ABC	
		Week 1	Week 2	Week 1	Week 2
	International news	50.4% (61)	21% (65)	25.5% (12)	13.5% (40)

Number of Items	Updates on national and local news	49.6% (60)	72.2% (223)	68.1% (32)	70.4% (209)
	Q&A	0% (0)	0% (0)	2.1% (1)	4.4% (13)
	Scientific information	0% (0)	0% (3)	4.2% (2)	11.8% (35)
	Government announcements	0% (0)	5.8% (18)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	<i>Total</i>	121	309	47	297

While the Google search data does not comprehensively reflect the number of news stories, articles, and videos (all termed ‘items’ in this research) that each online service published, it allows comparison of the categories of news coverage relating to COVID-19 featured by the two news services¹⁹ during the sample weeks. Table 1 indicates that, during the first week of media coverage featuring a local case, TTO published more items (121) compared with the ABC (47), indicating heightened awareness at this early stage. Just over half the TTO items published that week were international news stories (50.4%), almost twice the ABC’s proportion (25.5%), possibly reflecting Vietnam’s shared border with the epicentral nation, China. In the week that the first wave of the pandemic reached its height, both TTO (309) and the ABC (297) published many more items with a broadly equivalent focus on national and local news (TTO 72.2%; ABC 70.4%), indicating increasing media attention paid by each organisation to the national experience of the pandemic. In the second week, compared with the ABC, TTO was more likely to feature international news (21%, compared with 13.5%) and government announcements (TTO 5.8%, ABC 0), while the ABC’s priority was providing news related scientific information (ABC 11.8%, TTO 0) and Question-and-Answer type stories (ABC 4.4%; TTO 0). While the ABC focused on the science of the illness, it is possible that the international and government story focus of TTO reflects a country with long shared borders and a fear of disease incursion.

This paper now compares sources used by each media outlet in reporting upon COVID-19.

Table 2

Summary of the sources cited in TTO and ABC News stories run in the selected weeks

some items have more than one source (source/items)		TTO		ABC	
		Week 1 (52/121)	Week 2 (156/309)	Week 1 (62/47)	Week 2 (454/297)
Sources cited in items collected	Authorities*	32.7% (37)	41.4% (128)	65.9% (31)	57.6% (171)
	Hospitals	6% (8)	3.9% (12)	8.5% (4)	11.8% (35)
	Experts	0% (0)	1.0% (3)	12.8% (6)	13.1% (39)
TTO (n = 430)	Police	5.8% (7)	0.6% (2)	0% (0)	8.4% (25)
ABC (n = 344)	Ordinary People	0% (0)	1.6% (5)	23.4% (11)	27.6% (82)
	Other	0%	1.9%	21.3%	34.3%

(0) (6) (10) (102)

* includes the Steering Committee for Prevention and Control of Acute Respiratory Infection Caused by COVID-19 (in Vietnam) ('COVID-19 Steering Committee') and the Australian Government Department of Health.

Media impact research, including Berry et al. (2007), and Feng and MacGeorge (2010), indicates that an audience attributes importance to a health message in relation to its source and apparent credibility. Every source cited in each article was noted (Table 2), with ABC stories much more likely to cite sources than TTO. Although the likelihood of a TTO item citing a source rose from 42% in the first week to 50.5% at the 2020 COVID-19 peak, it seems that TTO stories do not require a source to be credible. When TTO cites a source, it focuses on reporting official, authorised information, often referencing Vietnam's COVID-19 Steering Committee. The ABC has a very different approach with many items including multiple sources. In week 1, the ABC cited an average of 1.32 sources per item, rising to 1.63 sources per item. The ABC also relies on a wider variety of sources, reflecting a more inclusive evaluation of what constitutes a legitimate news source. As well as more diverse informants, the ABC's range of journalistic content includes news, features, opinion, data-driven stories and an interactive map. In contrast, TTO stories are likely to convey unattributed official information and COVID-19 Steering Committee pronouncements. This reflects Author 1's (deidentified) previous findings relating to Vietnamese citizens' political discussions via social media. TTO rarely cites everyday Vietnamese citizens, with only five stories, constituting 1.6% of second week coverage (compared with the ABC's equivalent period 27.6%). This may reflect, as Ivic argues, Vietnamese authorities' valuation of "the community over the individual, to strive for consensus and [... respect for] an authority that takes care of its citizens" (Ivic 2020, p. 346). TTO's pro-collective coverage is further discussed below, while the next table investigates the use of news frames.

Table 3

Summary of the use of frames in the items collected for research

		TTO		ABC	
		Week 1	Week 2	Week 1	Week 2
Frames	#frames/#items	(43/121)	(106/309)	(37/47)	(112/297)
(as	% items using frame	35.5%	34.3%	78.7%	37.7%
below)	categories listed				
% of	Human Interest	4.1%	5.1%	17%	12.4%
items in		(5)	(16)	(8)	(37)
each	Attribution of	29.7%	18.4%	27.6%	9.4%
sample	Responsibility	(36)	(57)	(13)	(28)
week	- positive, regarding	14.8% (18)	5.8% (18)	6.3% (3)	0.0% (0)
using	the responsibility of				
frame	the state				
	- negative regarding	0.8% (1)	0.3% (1)	6.3% (3)	4.0%(12)
	the responsibility of				
	the state				
TTO	- authorities should	6.6% (8)	3.2% (10)	4.2% (2)	2.7% (8)
(n =	take more				
430)	responsibility				

ABC (n = 344)	- positive regarding the responsibility of individuals and communities	1.6% (2)	1.6% (5)	0% (0)	0.7% (2)
	- negative regarding the responsibility of individuals and communities	2.4% (3)	3.5% (11)	6.3% (3)	1.0% (3)
	- individuals and communities should take more responsibility	3.3% (4)	3.8% (12)	4.2% (2)	1.0% (3)
	Human Rights Awareness	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.7% (6)	4.3% (13)
Morality and Ethics	0.0% (0)	0.9% (3)	0.0% (0)	2.7% (8)	
Economic, Social Consequences	0.8% (1)	8.4% (26)	8.5% (4)	8.1% (24)	
Severity	0.2% (1)	1.2% (4)	12.7% (6)	0.7% (2)	

This table seems to indicate an ABC focus on framing COVID-19 stories for its audience prior to the pandemic's establishment in Australia, with broad comparability around the use of the frames investigated in both TTO and ABC across other weeks. Across both weeks, TTO was most likely to use the Attribution of Responsibility frame (21.7%: 93 items), with Economic and Social Consequences (6.2%: 27 items) and Human Interest (4.9%: 21 items) the next most frequently relied upon. The ABC's favoured frames were more balanced between Human Interest (13.1%, 45 items), Attribution of Responsibility (11.9%, 41 items) and Economic and Social Consequences (8.2%, 28 items). Focusing on the Attribution of Responsibility frame, however, each organisation assigns responsibility differently. TTO emphasises the positive role of the state in both collection weeks, with barely any critical commentary on the government response other than suggesting that authorities should do more. The ABC was as likely as TTO to say the government could do more but, at the height of the 2020 COVID-19 wave, the ABC was comparatively critical of the government response, with no positive comment.

Le (2020b) suggests that the Vietnamese media aimed to create social consensus via a two-pronged economic and social fight against COVID-19 and that this was central to Vietnam's successful handling of this COVID-19 wave. Indeed, TTO emphasised Vietnamese authorities' success in preventing COVID-19 outbreaks, and the border protection forces' effectiveness in preventing unauthorised entry into Vietnam, reducing the risk of outsiders infecting Vietnamese citizens. In Australia, however, the increasing emphasis on Human Interest stories was paralleled by interrogation of the Economic and Social Consequences of the pandemic at the level of specific communities and individual families. The ABC primed early Human Rights Awareness, with one-in-eight (12.7%) of first week coverage items, while the dataset indicates no evidence of TTO using this frame. This paper now addresses **RQ2: How did each media organisation blend discourses of public health, warfare, national security and grassroots solidarity in their 2020 coverage of the COVID-19 crisis?** by considering TTO/ABC coverage at the level of individual items.

TTO framing

“Each citizen is a soldier; each house, hamlet, and residential area is a fortress in the fight against the pandemic,” says TTO, reporting Vietnam’s Prime Minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc (full headline below, 3 August). The article title includes a Prime Ministerial quote: “fighting the pandemic like the enemy” [chống dịch như chống giặc]. The word ‘giặc’ refers to the armed forces of a country at war with another country. The metaphor of ‘fighting the enemy’ was coined in the first week of the Vietnamese COVID-19 outbreak (Thủ tướng yêu cầu lập đội phản ứng nhanh đối phó virus corona [Prime Minister to set up a fast response team to deal with coronavirus], 28 January), but TTO only uses it once at that time. By the second data period, July-August there were 14 uses. ‘The war against COVID-19’ [‘cuộc chiến,’ ‘hay ‘trận chiến’ chống COVID19] is an aligned metaphor. It was used six times in the first week and 34 times at the peak of the 2020 wave.

This framing may reference Vietnam’s long history of public mobilization, stretching back to the country’s fight against French colonialism (for approximately a century) and the subsequent decade-long conflict with the United States. In the fight against COVID-19, the administration actively invokes the legacy of violent solidarity. According to Todd Pollack, country director of the non-Government Organisation Partnership for Health Advancement in Vietnam (cited as LaForge 2021), “invoking the idea that the country was at war with this virus was strong for getting people to buy in and be prepared to sacrifice for the public good” (p. 12). TTO also uses other war-related references including ‘don’t fail in this war’ [‘không được để võ trận’]. Nurses and doctors are described as heroes; soldiers ‘on the frontline’ [tuyến đầu]. Disease prevention is termed ‘preparing for battle’, with a ‘synergy’ [fighting alliance] between militias, local forces and health officials (Bộ Quốc phòng tăng cường năng lực xét nghiệm COVID-19 cho Quân khu 5 [The Ministry of Defense strengthens the ability to test COVID-19 for 5th Military District], August 1). Description of a community-based infection elicits a wartime scenario: “The door is bolted, the roads are deserted, people’s faces are heavy with anxiety, the siren is ringing, calling to disinfection” (Bên trong khu dân cư có gia đình 7 người nhiễm COVID-19 [Inside a residential area with a family of 7 with COVID-19], 3 August).

La et al. (2020) analyse a collection of media items relating to COVID-19 that were published in Vietnam during three months at the start of 2019. They say that:

articles reporting on measures against COVID-19 employed rhetoric often associated with war, including: ‘fight the enemy’ (đánh giặc, in which the word giặc connotes the illegitimacy of said enemy, a nuance difficult to translate), ‘leave nobody behind’ (không bỏ lại ai phía sau; as if in a battle march), ‘grand solidarity’ (đại đoàn kết, alluding to the two Indochina wars against France and the U.S.), etc.

(La et al. 2020: 20)

The congruence between official statements and the TTO coverage illustrates how the mainstream Vietnamese media aligns itself with the combative language of officialdom, helping to propagandise citizens. Pham (2020) argues that Vietnam “successfully activated a program embedded in the Vietnamese genome: the people’s war program” (Pham 2020). Compared with TTO, in the two weeks selected for analysis, the ABC only once used the word ‘war’ in relation to COVID-19, mainly deploying gentler analogies.

A TTO article published on 1 August quotes a military general describing how the militia, collaborating with local forces, are tracking “down patients with COVID-19” (Bộ Quốc phòng tăng cường năng lực xét nghiệm COVID-19 cho Quân khu 5 [The Ministry of Defense strengthening COVID-19 testing capacity for 5th Military District], 1 August). The terms ‘elimination’ and ‘removal’ also reinforce Vietnam’s militaristic determination to combat the

coronavirus. Interestingly, TTO uses ‘ô dịch’ [disease cluster] to reference areas with a heightened infection risk. Arguably, ‘disease cluster’ elicits greater negativity than the more neutral ‘hotspot’ or ‘epicentre’ used by the ABC.

The TTO items referring to infected individuals and disease clusters principally use language extracted from health officials’ press releases. As a result, when people are seen as effective in resisting infection, the terminology used positions them as part of a military, with implications for individual rights. This may partly explain why the Human Rights Awareness frame is absent from TTO’s coverage of the pandemic. While individual responsibility is accepted, it operates as one of the obligations owed by that individual to the collective, rather than positioning the individual and state as having reciprocal rights and obligations in relation to each other.

ABC framing

The ABC frames the fight against COVID-19 in importantly different ways from those used by TTO. For example, 16 news items criticise the Australian government’s handling of the pandemic. Twenty-two further items showcase opinions that oppose the authorities’ response to pandemic management. This diversity of opinion is reflected in the 41 items employing an Attribution of Responsibilities framing. Fifteen items offer negative judgements of the authorities’ response, while a further ten stories demand improved handling of the coronavirus risk. Criticism of the authorities is particularly evident during the second week sampled, where multiple items address the high number of infections in the aged care sector and the social dislocation consequent upon the authorities’ strategy of isolation and lockdown.

In the first week’s coverage, controversy raged around a plan to evacuate Australian families from Wuhan in China to the Christmas Island immigration detention centre, which is not child-friendly (4 items). In the second data period, Victoria’s (then) record number of COVID-19 cases triggered criticism regarding the government’s response, using words such as: ‘silly,’ ‘terrible,’ and ‘wrong’ (Victoria’s record high COVID-19 cases are startling – is it time to change our response?, 31 July); ‘failure’ (Nine per cent of all Queensland police staff needed for coronavirus duties for foreseeable future, 28 July); ‘approaches make things worse’ (More than a quarter of Victoria coronavirus patients not at home when doorknocked by ADF [Australian Defence Force], 31 July); and ‘inadequate’ (Coronavirus: Australian government urges travellers to reconsider going to China, 28 January). These terms are among the negative words used to describe various governments’ (federal and state) responses.

Five items with question headlines potentially raise concerns about the authorities’ competence. These include: COVID-19: How well have we really responded? (28 July), COVID-19: Where did we go wrong with aged care? (30 July), and COVID-19: How does the government make decisions? (31 July). The ABC also uses a question-and-answer format to structure another seven items in the dataset. Constant questioning may imply a lack of confidence, prompting concern about authorities’ handling of the pandemic at its peak. Eight items focus specifically on fatal outbreaks in Victoria’s aged care sector. Issues addressed include whether or not to take residents out of homes and move them to hospitals en masse; national strategies to prevent coronavirus outbreaks in aged care homes; are older people treated as if ‘out of mind, out of sight’?; and whether elder care in residential homes is good enough. Critics highlight different infection rates across Victoria’s aged care’s public-private divide (Why are there more COVID-19 cases in private aged care than the public sector?, 1 August).

In contrast with the ABC, there are no such questions or criticisms in the TTO's COVID-19 coverage. Instead, TTO principally posts updates, quoting government sources and health officials. The absence of negative comment highlights differences in the media organisations' reporting practices, even though both the online services reflect mainstream media. As previously noted, the TTO dataset includes no usage of a Human Right Awareness frame, whereas the ABC uses it 19 times. Coverage includes reporting of racist attacks on Asians and Africans: "people are looking at us and thinking 'he's a virus carrier'" (Coronavirus has sparked racist attacks on Asians in Australia — including me, 31 January) and an "attack on the whole community" (Racism directed at women charged with coronavirus border fraud ostracises African Australians, 31 July).

The ABC also raises human rights concerns about:

- a possible plan to use electronic monitors to ensure people are isolating at home (Coronavirus Australia live news: Victoria records 397 new COVID-19 cases, Queensland borders now closed to all of Greater Sydney, 1 August);
- the disclosure of private medical information after names and images of two women diagnosed with COVID-19 were spread across social media (Naming Qld teens 'irresponsible and wildly counterproductive' to stopping spread of coronavirus: health expert, psychologist, 30 July);
- whether one person can truly be held responsible for a massive outbreak (Coronavirus COVID-19 'superspreaders' are emerging as the lepers of the 21st century, 28 July);
- employment equity as a health issue (Mapping COVID-19 spread in Melbourne shows link to job types and ability to stay home, 30 July); and
- social inequalities between full-time workers who get sick leave, and casual workers who go without pay when ill (Victoria shows coronavirus is a pandemic of casual, insecure work, 27 July).

In short, TTO coverage supported the government's actions and encouraged Vietnamese audiences to do so too, while ABC interrogated Australia's responses to COVID-19 and elicited sympathy for those people negatively impacted by government decisions. While both approaches encourage individual and public responsibility, one does so at the expense of individuals; the other at the expense of government policy.

Discussion

Based on the data collected, the study's findings indicate that the ABC and TTO use distinctly different frames when reporting attempts to battle the coronavirus epidemic. While the ABC frames individuals as important, focussing upon human interest stories and people's rights, TTO perceives healthy citizenry as soldiers and constructs the vulnerable and infected as a threat to community wellbeing. Highlighting individual responsibility, TTO emphasises that people belong to a collective (village or urban area), with the individual responsible for not catching COVID-19 and thus preventing the pandemic spreading into their community. This approach reflects Clarke and Everest's (2006) perception that illness "prevention possibilities" are often "framed as if they are entirely within the capabilities of individual actions and system accountability is, relatively speaking, ignored" (Clarke and Everest 2006, p. 2598). Rather than ABC's frame of human rights, TTO's focus is on individuals' obligations to others. As Huynh (2020) notes, reinforcing wartime perspectives: "This is the first time since the unification after

the Vietnam War that the whole Vietnamese community, including military, scholars, businessmen, and many different classes in our society, have [all] participated.” Moreover, Ivic (2020) argues that the use of the war metaphor in Vietnamese public discourse did not lead to the identification of scapegoats. Instead, it helped “engage local people, speed[ing] up the process of contact tracing and limit[ing] lockdowns to areas suspected of an outbreak” (Le, 2020a).

TTO coverage of the pandemic, and its use of terms associated with wartime, shows how the mainstream Vietnamese media framed COVID-19 as a series of short-term battles to combat serious outbreaks of the disease. An emergency response was required to stamp out an outbreak (Leach et al., 2010). In contrast, the ABC items framing Human Interest approaches, plus the ABC’s use of everyday people as sources, engages the emotions while attracting and influencing audiences. The ABC’s emotion-informed content differs significantly from the dry descriptive language and numbers that characterise TTO’s coverage.

The ABC’s coverage of COVID-19, alongside its Human Rights Awareness framing, indicates a decision to focus on “the structural causes of inequity and disease vulnerability amongst particular populations” (Leach et al. 2010, p. 372). Criticisms and concerns raised by the ABC may reflect an initial response to an apparently short-term health challenge that prompted reflection upon authorities’ longer-term responses to the chronic inequalities highlighted by the Australian experience of COVID-19. From that starting point, the ABC focused upon human rights concerns, such as the individual’s right to protect personal data; equality in health care, and social inclusion. In other words, the framework the ABC used to cover the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 required it to engage its audiences in political matters: issues ignored by TTO.

Due to restricting this analysis to two comparable media organisations’ outputs on one topic over two equivalent weeks of coverage, this paper does not aim to cover all differences between the Australian and Vietnamese media systems. With particular reference to RQ1, the data (Tables 1-3) could have been strengthened by the use of a second coder and are impacted by the unreliability associated with comparatively small data cells as the analysis drills deeper into specific aspects of the overall categories addressed. Further, the percentages offered relate only to aspects of the dataset of COVID-19 coverage as specified in the table, across the sample weeks. It does not speak to the relative importance attributed to COVID-19 stories in relation to other subjects. Adding a quantitative study that triangulates and complements the qualitative content analysis used here would add robustness to the findings. This data cannot be generalised to support significant conclusions. It can be used to suggest future research directions, however. These could take a more holistic approach, investigating the dominant framing strategies characterising these two media systems, while also interviewing journalists and audiences in relation to TTO and the ABC. A study addressing journalists’ use of media releases and other sources used to inform news items could examine information flows between authorities, journalists and the public, exploring how these influence audience understandings of issues raised. In the meantime, this paper captures differences gleaned from the COVID-19 coverage of two broadly comparative media organisations in two specific weeks of their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam and Australia.

Conclusion

The Vietnamese media’s communication approach is consistent with the “information delivery model” (Seale 2003, p. 7) of health messaging, in which “all the sources cited are biomedical authorities, and the lay audience is projected as a passive receiver of the information they

disseminate” (Briggs and Hallin 2016, p. 25). The communication model driving Vietnam’s state-owned media, as analysed above, is one-way and top-down in Entman’s (2004) terms (Bucatariu 2020; Vuong et al. 2021). The voices of everyday people are ignored, with government spokespeople and health officials privileged. Such a media landscape creates obstacles for individuals who want “to recuperate power away from medical and scientific institutions through bottom-up activism and a political economy of hope” (Levina 2012, p. 125).

In contrast, the ABC coverage draws upon diverse sources of information, including the government, health officials, experts in other fields and, especially, everyday people (Park et al. 2022). This approach requires ABC journalists to be highly engaged with and mediating a wide range of opinions and actors, facilitating an active audience. The news service pays attention to people’s perspectives, even when (or, maybe, especially when) their opinions oppose government policies.

Signorielli (1993) argues that when the media delivers health messages it “minimises or ignores the social, political or economic factors of the disease, while it focuses on and reinforces the individual nature of disease” (p. 26). In the case of ABC and TTO coverage of COVID-19, ABC references social, political and economic factors more than TTO does. This aligns with the developmental model proposed by Leach, Scoones and Stirling (2010) relating to the reporting of emergency responses to disease outbreaks. Focusing on the systemic causes of deprivation and susceptibility to disease within specific populations, Leach et al. (2010) highlights these as long-term consequences of disadvantage. TTO’s implicit health model, in contrast, emphasises the short-term: presenting acute outbreaks as requiring rapid identification and control. Differences in the reporting styles of the ABC and TTO reveal differences between media systems and political systems, even given the successful 2020 response to COVID-19 in both countries. ABC’s framing of the COVID-19 crisis propelled a political discussion in Australia, while the Vietnamese media landscape eschewed such debate.

Acknowledgements

(deidentified)

References

ABC (2019) *Annual report*. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

An SK and Gower KK (2009) How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage. *Public Relations Review* 35(2): 107-112.

Author 1 (deidentified reference)

Beaudoin CE (2007) SARS news coverage and its determinants in China and the U.S. *International Communication Gazette* 69(6): 509-524.

Berry TR et al. (2007) SARS wars: an examination of the quantity and construction of health information in the news media. *Health communication* 21(1): 35-44.

- Bergmann JR (1998) Introduction: Morality in discourse. *Research on Language & Social Interaction* 31(3-4): 279-294.
- Bingham A and Witkowsky P (2021). Qualitative analysis: deductive and inductive approaches. In C. Vanover, P. Mihas, & J. Saldaña (Eds.), *Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: After the interview*. SAGE Publications:133-146.
- Briggs CL and Hallin DC (2016) *Making health public: How news coverage is remaking media, medicine, and contemporary life*. New York: Routledge.
- Briggs CL and Nichter M (2009) Biocommunicability and the biopolitics of pandemic threats. *Medical anthropology* 28(3): 189-198.
- Berinsky AJ and Kinder DR (2006) Making sense of issues through media frames: Understanding the Kosovo crisis. *The Journal of Politics* 68(3): 640-656.
- Buckley J (2022) The dual structure of Vietnam's labour relations. In: Shin HB, Mckenzie M and Oh DY (Eds.). *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: insights for a post-pandemic world*. London: LSE Press, pp. 108-117.
- Clarke JN and Everest MM (2006) Cancer in the mass print media: fear, uncertainty and the medical model. *Social science & medicine* 62(10): 2591-2600.
- Corcoran PE (2006) *Emotional framing in Australian journalism*. In: 8th Australian & New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) International Conference. Adelaide: Australia.
- D'Auria G and De Smet A (2020) Leadership in a crisis: Responding to the coronavirus outbreak and future challenges. *Psychology* 22(2): 273-287.
- Entman RM (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(3): 51-58.
- Entman RM (2003) *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press.
- Feng B and MacGeorge EL (2010) The influences of message and source factors on advice outcomes. *Communication Research* 37(4): 553-575.
- Fram SM (2013) The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *Qualitative Report* 18 (Art.1): 1-25. <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/fram1.pdf>
- Gallois C (2020) The language of fear? Australian media and the pandemic. *InPsych* 43 (3). <https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/inpsych/2020/june-july-issue-3/the-language-of-fear-australian-media-and-the-pand>
- Goffman E (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- Graber DA and Dunaway J (2017) *Mass media and American politics*. California: CQ Press.

- Grant C (2013) *Written journalism in Vietnam*. Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1723
- Heng, RHK (2001) Media negotiating the state: In the name of the law in anticipation. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 16(2): 213-237.
- Holland K et al. (2014) A legacy of the swine flu global pandemic: Journalists, expert sources, and conflicts of interest. *Journalism* 15(1): 53–71.
- Holland K and Lewis M (2021) “Mapping national news reports on COVID-19 in Australia: Topics, Sources, and Imagined Audience”. In: Lewis M, Govender E & Holland K (Eds). *Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan): 59-81.
- Huynh TLD (2020) The COVID-19 containment in Vietnam: What are we doing? *Journal of Global Health* 10(1).
- Ivic S (2020) Vietnam’s response to the Covid-19 outbreak. *Asian Bioethics Review* 12(3): 341-347.
- Jungherr A, Posegga O and An J (2019). Discursive power in contemporary media systems: A comparative framework. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24(4): 404-425.
- LaForge G (2021 June). “All In: Vietnam’s War Against COVID-19, 2019-2020.” *Innovations for Successful societies*. https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfulsocieties/files/Vietnam_Final_2.pdf
- La VP et al. (2020) Policy response, social media and science journalism for the sustainability of the public health system amid the COVID-19 outbreak: The Vietnam lessons. *Sustainability* 12(7): 2931. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072931>
- Le L (2020) Nationalism, heroism and media in Vietnam’s war on COVID-19. *East Asia Forum*. Available at: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/24/nationalism-heroism-and-media-in-vietnams-war-on-covid-19/> (accessed 10 October 2020).
- Le SM (2020b) Containing the coronavirus (COVID-19): Lessons from Vietnam. *World Bank Blogs* 30. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/containing-coronavirus-covid-19-lessons-vietnam> (accessed 10 September 2020).
- Le TTN, Dang TT & Diem TN (2021). Understanding Role of Information and Communication Technology Application in Vietnam’s Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Pandemic. In Oliva D, Hassan SA, & Mohamed A (Eds.). *Artificial Intelligence for COVID-19*. Springer: 101-118.
- Leach M, Scoones I and Stirling A (2010) Governing epidemics in an age of complexity: Narratives, politics and pathways to sustainability. *Global Environmental Change* 20(3): 369-377.
- Levina M (2012) *Pandemics and the media*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Lima DL, Lopes MAA and Brito AM (2020) Social media: friend or foe in the COVID-19 pandemic? *Clinics* 75 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.6061/clinics/2020/e1953>
- Liu NX (2018) *News framing through English-Chinese translation: A comparative study of Chinese and English media discourse*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Mackriell K (1996) Redefining the ABC and its Charter. *IPA Review* 49(2): 9.
- McCombs M, Holbert L, Kioussis S and Wanta W (2011). *The news and public opinion: Media effects on civic life*. Cambridge: Polity
- McKinley C (2011). *Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets: Vietnam*. World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. <https://wanifra.org/insight/report-financially-viable-media-in-emerging-and-developing-markets/?lang=de>
- Moloney K and Moloney S (2020). Australian Quarantine Policy: From centralisation to coordination with mid-pandemic COVID-19 shifts. *Public Administration Review* 80(4): 671-682.
- Mutua SN and Ong'ong'a DO (2020). Online news media framing of COVID-19 pandemic: Probing the initial phases of the disease outbreak in international media. *European Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Education* 1(2), e02006. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ejimed/8402>
- Newman N et al. (2021) *Reuters Institute digital news report*. London, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Nguyen D (2020) Mediatisation and datafication in the global COVID-19 pandemic: on the urgency of data literacy. *Media International Australia* 178(1): 210-214.
- Ogbodo JN et al. (2020) Communicating health crisis: a content analysis of global media framing of COVID-19. *Health promotion perspectives* 10(3): 257-269.
- Pan PL and Meng J (2016) Media frames across stages of health crisis: A crisis management approach to news coverage of flu pandemic. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 24(2): 95-106.
- Park S, McGuinness K, Fisher C, Lee JY, McCallum K & Nolan D (2022). *Digital news report: Australia 2022*. News and Media Research Centre.
- Petersen A et al. (2019) The shifting politics of patient activism: From bio-sociality to bio-digital citizenship. *Health* 23(4): 478-494.
- Pham TH (2020) Ngày thứ 100 [Day 100]. *Procontra*. Available at: <http://www.procontra.asia/?p=6327> (accessed 22 October 2020).
- Rosenstock IM, Strecher VJ and Becker MH (1988) Social learning theory and the health belief model. *Health education quarterly* 15(2): 175-183.
- Seale C (2003) *Media and health*. London, UK: SAGE.

- Semetko HA and Valkenburg PM (2000) Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of communication* 50(2): 93-109.
- Shaw R et al. (2020) Governance, technology and citizen behavior in pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19 in East Asia. *Progress in disaster science* 6 (2020): 100090. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100090>
- Signorielli N (1993) *Mass media images and impact on health: A sourcebook*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press.
- Sun W (2021). The virus of fear and anxiety: China, COVID-19, and the Australian media. *Global media and China*, 6(1), 24-39.
- Vuong QH, La VP, Nguyen THT, Nguyen MH, Le TT & Ho MT (2021). An AI-Enabled Approach in Analyzing Media Data: An Example from Data on COVID-19 News Coverage in Vietnam. *Data*, 6(7), 70.
- Worldometer (2020a) *Australia population*. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/vietnam-population/> (accessed 10 September 2020).
- Worldometer (2020b) *Vietnam population*. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/vietnam-population/> (accessed 10 September 2020).