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# A comparative look at the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in Chinese and American newspapers

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**A comparative look at the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake  
in Chinese and American newspapers**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Ames, Iowa

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	7
CHAPTER 3. METHOD	26
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	37
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	56
REFERENCES	67
APPENDIX: SICHUAN EARTHQUAKE COVERAGE CODEBOOK	77

## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Statement of the Problem

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake that measured 7.9 on the Richter scale ravaged China's Sichuan province. According to official figures, 69,227 were killed, 374,176 were injured, and 18,222 were listed as missing in the aftermath of this tremor. The earthquake, felt thousands of kilometers away from Sichuan, rendered about 4.8 million people homeless. In the following months, several strong aftershocks hit the province anew, causing more casualties and damages. This natural disaster is considered the deadliest to hit China since the 1976 Tangshan earthquake that killed at least 240,000 people (Central People's Government of China, 2008).

As with most natural disasters that produced heavy casualties, the Sichuan earthquake understandably received extensive media attention from around the world. News of the earthquake grabbed headlines in the days that followed. The domestic media stopped regular programs and provided 24-hour coverage of rescue and relief efforts. News reports were continuously updated, discussing damages, death tolls, and the government's response. Foreign reporters were allowed to visit the disaster areas, and their accounts resulted in unprecedented international aid and support.

What was not too obvious in the way China dealt and coped with this disaster and its attendant media coverage were the subtle improvements in governance and other procedures that provide evidence that the country is undergoing tremendous social

transformation. Among others, the earthquake brought to light several changes in government policies regarding the role of the media and the quality of media coverage of natural calamities.

When the Tangshan earthquake, which measured 7.8 on the Richter scale, hit China in 1976 (Central People's Government, 2008), people had little access to disaster news sources because the media were more concerned with the dynamics of the ten-year Cultural Revolution (Szczepanski, 2009). At that time, the Xinhua News Agency, the national news service, did not do much but publish a press release that informed the public about an earthquake that centered in Tangshan City to the west of Beijing. The government refused to receive foreign aid, hid disaster news from the public, and did not report the death toll accordingly. Lacking information, people felt inordinately anxious about the event; most information came to them by way of rumors.

In stark contrast, Xinhua confirmed the occurrence of the Sichuan earthquake with the China Earthquake Administration 20 minutes after the first tremors. Ten minutes later, the China Central Television (CCTV) began live coverage of the disaster. Hundreds of journalists converged in the damaged areas, and information sharing networks were formed online and even on cell phones, producing unprecedented media coverage (Wang and Zheng, 2008).

Not only did domestic reporters have their first taste of what it is like to cover a major event under relatively free conditions; the foreign media, present in droves, brought the damage and relief efforts live to people in China and abroad because they were given

unprecedented access to the disaster areas. A foreign reporter was even able to talk to local residents in the presence of police officers, a practice never before allowed.

Apparently, in this case, China has become more open and transparent. The *Los Angeles Times*, for one, hailed “the vividness and diversity of the Chinese media coverage of the earthquake” (Chinaview, 2008, para. 3). The *New York Times* also spoke highly of the Chinese government response, saying that “Beijing was better in handling the situation compared to what Washington did to deal with Hurricane Katrina in 2005” (Chinaview, 2008, para. 6). The question, then, becomes: Are these changes sufficient to produce similarities in the way a single disaster event was framed by the mass media system of China and that of other countries?

The presence of foreign journalists has likely constructed news images about the disaster—and about China in general—to Chinese citizens and to people all over the world. Such images are shaped by many factors, including politics, culture and conflict. Media coverage of issues is inevitably influenced by different perspectives applied by reporters who operate under different media philosophies and journalistic systems. Because China has always been an important item in the U.S. media agenda, it is pertinent to examine how the U.S. media covered this single event—the Sichuan earthquake—that captured the attention of the global press because of its inherent news value: the disaster exacted a high death toll and tremendous damage to properties. But beyond this, were there other determinants of how the media portrayed this disaster? Is

there any difference in the way the Chinese and the U.S. news media covered this incident?

To answer these questions, it is important to consider how news stories about the earthquake were framed in the two countries' media. Although news frames are always implicit and often taken for granted, they determine what is emphasized and what is ignored. According to Entman (1993), framing is the process of "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient" to the public (p. 52). Gitlin (1980) explains that media frames pattern the world for people in the media and those who depend on their reports, organize the story, and suggest certain attitudes audience members should hold about topics and issues. By analyzing the content of Chinese and American media reports, this study attempts to find out what frames were employed by journalists in the two press systems to report on an important event. A cursory examination of disaster reports indicates that journalists usually frame disaster stories in terms of damage, rescue and relief efforts, reconstruction, government response, human interest, prevention management, mortality and injuries. Which of these were dominant in the Chinese and American newspaper accounts of this tragic event? Were there other frames present?

In China, news stories immediately after the Sichuan earthquake revealed an emphasis on the plight of local victims and rescue efforts in which the government, the media and the public took active parts. With a strong sense of national unity, hundreds of thousands of volunteers from all over the country worked with soldiers and rescuers.

Later, media reports increasingly criticized poor building construction standards that caused many school structures to collapse. They demanded accountability for the death of many school children. Gradually, however, the reports shifted to the positive government response, especially concerning official efforts to rescue and reconstruct. The main themes became “positive propaganda” and the need to “uphold unity and stability.” It is as if the domestic media have again realized their responsibility to establish the public’s confidence on their government after a catastrophic natural disaster. Did the U.S. media use similar frames to depict this natural disaster that happened halfway around the world?

Geographic constraints make the public dependent on the media for information about important events such as natural disasters in far-flung places. In order to enhance public understanding, frames such as those that discuss damage, mortality and injury may be frequently used while that of reconstruction and prevention management frames may be less employed. Victim or other emotion-appealing frames may also be applied to provide a vivid picture of what happened in the wake of a highly destructive calamity.

This study examines the earthquake coverage of two newspapers published in China, the *People’s Daily*, China’s newspaper of record, and the *West China City Daily*. The coverage of these two newspapers will be compared against that of two American newspapers, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, both considered exponents of foreign news coverage in the United States. The *People’s Daily* is considered one of the most authoritative newspapers in China and one of the most important information sources of the nation’s opinion leaders. The *West China City Daily* is a daily newspaper



with the largest circulation in the earthquake-hit area. The *Washington Post* is an authoritative newspaper widely read by policymakers. The well-indexed *New York Times* is also recognized as an elite news journal with a large national circulation. The current study aims to determine whether these leading newspapers framed the Sichuan earthquake in different ways.

The results of this study attempt to enrich the body of knowledge regarding the media's coverage of natural disasters. The findings also are expected to provide insights into the impact of different media systems and their policies on media performance, especially regarding the handling of important natural calamities. The results will also be useful to media practitioners who can use them to be better aware of professional ethics and responsibility during times of emergency. It also offers recommendations on how they can keep their audiences well informed during crisis situations.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores disaster reporting and how natural disasters, in general, are covered in the media. Next, how framing theory applies in the case of newspapers' coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in China and America is discussed. The chapter also examines frequently used framing themes in media coverage of natural disasters. The research questions emanating from the literature and theoretical formulations are presented.

#### Framing Theory

Framing refers to the way content is portrayed. It has been known that the same content can be framed in different ways to produce different audience understandings. Goffman (1974) is perhaps the first scholar to develop the general concept of framing. He defined frames as the “principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them” (p. 10). Frames help people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” problems and their solutions (p. 21). According to Entman (1993), framing involves selection and salience. To him, frames function “to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies” (as cited in McQuail, 2005, p. 378). Specifically, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing, then, can be described as a “story angle or hook.” It is “the central organizing idea or story line that

provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events and weaves a connection among them” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143).

After a disaster event, the media are supposed to inform the public as to what has happened, why it happened, what is being done to alleviate the situation, and what can be expected in the future. With the goal of framing the problem, the media use certain perspectives in news coverage to help the public organize and understand information. Gross (2006) explains that “frames will, by highlighting certain aspects of an event or policy, guide audience members’ thoughts about the event or issue in predictable ways to a predictable conclusion” (p. 3).

This description of the framing function suggests two kinds of frames—media frames and audience frames. Gitlin (1980) defined media frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol handlers [journalists] routinely organize discourse whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). By the same token, audience frames can be defined as persistent patterns of cognition and interpretation of objects, issues and events developed among audiences by media reports. Framing theory suggests that media frames influence individual thinking by emphasizing some aspects of reality over others (Gamson et al., 1992). Gitlin (1980) posits that “media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports” (p. 7). He argues that “the very nature and routines of journalism makes the media emphasize some facets of news over others. These routines tend to define “the story, identify the protagonists and...suggest appropriate [audience] attitudes toward them” (Koplatadze, 2004, p. 19). Entman (1993) explains that media frames influence the audiences’ interpretation of an issue by magnifying or shrinking specific elements to

make them more or less salient. Media frames interact with people's previous schemas to develop new easily accessible cognitive schemas that determine one's interpretations of an issue (Shen, 2004).

Framing analysis is based on the assumption that journalists filter information in ways that affect audience members' understanding or interpretation of issues, stories, or events (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p.327). Journalists can influence attitudes and behavior by selecting certain facts, emphasizing specific issues or events over others, and presenting issues or events in a specific order.

Vasterman et al. (2005) suggest that news can be structured both by a "balanced frame" and by a "one-sided frame." Disaster-related events can be presented using both frames. Other than this, some reports may follow social actors or government actions; others may emphasize shocking or unusual events. Framing may have a powerful effect on people's cognitions of disaster events because a crisis situation heightens people's dependence on the mass media based on the media dependency theory proposed by Ball Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). A disaster event is often characterized by uncertainty and rapid social transformation, two conditions that may considerably foster public reliance on the mass media as the prime source of information. For many, including the disaster victims, the media, because of their structural connectedness to the best sources of information, become a potent resource for proper orientation and courses of action.

### **Disaster Reporting**

Journalists follow a framework for covering natural disasters. According to Scraton (2003), the coverage typically presents eight kinds of information almost in a temporal sequence: the "historical context, recent context, immediate circumstances, the moment, rescue and evacuation, immediate aftermath, short-term aftermath, and

long-term aftermath and implications” (p. 422). Providing information along these lines not only serves audiences in times of crisis but also offers knowledge necessary for recovery and the formulation of disaster preparedness plans.

For disaster reporters, accuracy is not just a reporting criterion; it is applied as a matter of public duty. The media are often criticized if people think the release of information is delayed, but disaster reporters generally opt to delay breaking the news in the absence of verified facts (Scraton, 2003).

Most criticisms of media performance in times of disaster concerns the failure to provide pre-disaster assessments. Scholars (e.g., Walters, Wilkins and Walter, 1989) say, for example, that there are two important elements local journalists often neglect to investigate: community disaster preparation and the quality and preparedness of emergency efforts. Journalists are also criticized for failing to acquaint themselves with disaster terminology, environmental and geographic circumstances, and the effectiveness of disaster plans. This can result in miscommunication from inadequate channels and sources, and translation difficulties because of technical jargon (Walters et al., 1989).

Observers say that one significant improvement in the news media’s disaster reporting is the way such reports provide complete and thorough coverage of organizational behavior by those whose duty is to protect and assist the public during trying times. Studies in the 1980s have found that individuals develop psychological disorders after a natural disaster not as direct or immediate results of the tragedy; they are the consequences of “inept management and poor decisions by public and private bureaucracies trying to help in the emergency or [its] immediate post-impact period” (Quarantelli, 1985, as cited in Walters et al., 1989, p. 7). In a study conducted by Quarantelli in 1981, the news media were described as taking a “command post view” in

disaster coverage. When journalists do focus on individuals affected, they are commonly portrayed as hapless victims that generate numerous human interest stories (as cited in Walters et al., 1989).

During natural disasters, the news media have an obligation to disseminate accurate information that responds to the public's legitimate needs (Elliott, 1986, as cited in Walters et al., 1989). Journalists play an important and challenging role in covering a disaster because they can influence viewers' interpretations and responses at critical emergency periods. Elliott (1986) proposes six guidelines for disaster reporting that maintain the priority of meeting audiences' needs. According to him, journalists should: "1) prepare themselves with the contexts of the disaster at hand and critically analyze any information received from official sources (which includes maintaining awareness of the status of environmental and organizational situations); 2) become active participants in the fact gathering process as opposed to merely acting as 'reactive documentarians'; 3) providing citizens with as much information as possible with which they may decide their own actions. In the same vein, journalists should seriously consider the positives and negatives of the information they intend to release and how they will contribute to the crisis; 4) validate that the information being provided is accurate; 5) focus more attention on the contextual elements of the circumstance and not on stories about victimization; and 6) work at setting the national agenda so as to keep those issues raised by the disaster as government priorities" (Elliott, 1986, as cited in Walters et al., 1989, pp. 169-170).

The highly destructive aftermath of natural disasters imbue these events with high news value and thus attract considerable media interest. Media coverage of natural disasters often varies depending on the nature of the disaster itself and the news perspectives brought to bear on the coverage. Generally speaking, the mainstream media

do a good job at providing details in stories about major natural calamities (Shah, 2005), but like the coverage of most issues, media performance in the case of disasters—and the government’s response—tend to vary from one situation to another. Some examples are worth citing to demonstrate this variation.

### **The Case of Hurricane Katrina**

Hurricane Katrina is one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. It made landfall as “a Category 4 storm near Buras, Louisiana (approximately 50 miles southeast of New Orleans) on the morning of August 29, 2005. By August 30, up to 80% of New Orleans was flooded—the result of storm surges breaching the levee system of the largely below-sea-level city” (Miles, 2006, p. 367). The total damage is estimated at \$81.2 billion. The total number of lives lost is 1,836, mainly from the states of Louisiana and Mississippi. More than 700 people were categorized as missing in Louisiana alone, and 90,000 square miles were severely damaged, an area almost as large as the United Kingdom. “The hurricane left an estimated three million people without electricity...Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff described the aftermath as ‘probably the worst catastrophe, or set of catastrophes’ the country has ever experienced” (Bentley & Zollinger, 2005, para. 4).

Media reports covered every angle of the catastrophe. Katrina has also been the subject of academic research and documentaries. For instance, Miles (2006) examined the role of the news media in natural disaster risk and recovery by dividing the coverage into four time periods. Four capital types—natural, human, social, and built, which is measured by “examining the importance of purchased and rented goods, the importance of public investments, etc.” (Mulder et al., 2005, p. 19)—were used as frames of reference with which to evaluate media coverage. They concluded that media coverage of

recovery strategies contributed to people's risk perception. The study found that "the built, human and social capital components of hurricane vulnerability and risk were emphasized over the natural capital components" (Miles, 2006, p. 372).

### **The Case of the Pakistan and India Earthquake**

In October 2005, an earthquake that centered on the Kashmir region shook Pakistan and bordering parts of India. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that "38,000 people died in the quake, 60,000 were injured and 3.3 million were left homeless. At least another 1,400 people died in Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan says the quake will cost it \$5 billion in infrastructure losses" (as cited in Shah, 2005, para. 18). In the rough mountainous areas hit by the quake, heavy rains and winds made relief operations more difficult. The death toll doubled due to hunger and the bitter cold. Countries around the world donated to the relief operations, but more was needed to rebuild.

Pakistan's military-led relief operations have been praised by the media, but according to the BBC, the less-reported Indian relief operations have been poor. Media outlets complained that only part of the money raised was used for the efforts. "Aid agencies say they've only received a small portion of the money they need to save the lives of millions left homeless as the freezing winter conditions approach fast" (BBC, para. 3). At this point, the international response was described as inadequate in general.

"The number of people killed is unquestionably the most important independent variable" affecting the *New York Times*' coverage of the Pakistan earthquake (VanBelle, 2000, p. 64). The lack of international aid also dominated media reports.

### **The Case of the Hurricanes in Central America**



A few weeks before the Pakistan earthquake, Hurricane Stan swept through Central America. It was less reported in the world media perhaps because the casualties in this case were not as many. The BBC reported that “mudslides caused by tropical storm Stan are known to have killed more than 770 people in Central America and Mexico. Hundreds more are thought to be missing” (para.1). “Guatemala is the worst-hit country. Entire villages have been wiped out by landslides and flash floods, and hundreds of people have been killed. The search for survivors has been called off, and the death toll could climb to 2,000” (para. 5). “More than 1,400 people are believed to have died in Panabaj, 180 km west of the country’s capital, Guatemala City” (para.7). Millions of people were left homeless by mudslides. In addition to these damage details, there were numerous news articles about victims, a major concern of an international audience.

### **Differential Treatment of Victims**

How certain victims have been treated in natural disaster coverage has been the subject of recent gripes about media performance. A stark example is the treatment of African-Americans in the Katrina coverage. On September 1, 2005, two photos appeared on *Yahoo News*. The first depicts a young black man dragging a garbage bag; the other portrays a young white couple in backpacks, dragging a small white grocery bag and walking through flood waters. The caption for the first photo says, “A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans” (HungryBlues, 2005, para. 1). The second photo’s caption, on the other hand, reads, “Two residents wade through chest-deep waters after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area” (HungryBlues, 2005, para. 2). Many who were unable to evacuate before the flood waters overwhelmed New

Orleans were poor black residents. The difference in wording clearly reveals stereotypical notions of minority groups that fomented an intense public debate.

Heldman (2007) also analyzed the language used to describe hurricane victims and concludes that pre-existing racist stereotypes were prevalent in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

### **Performance of Relief Agencies**

The media also report on the performance of relief agencies and organizations, specifically their response to catastrophes. On December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami slammed into the shores of eight countries in Asia and Africa, leaving nearly 230,000 people dead or missing and another two million homeless (Reuters AlertNet, 2005). A year after this incident, “the vast majority of the 1.8 million people who lost their homes are still in temporary accommodations” (para. 2). Although the pace of reconstruction was slow, the initial relief efforts were prompt and were described as encouraging. According to United Nations emergency coordinator Jan Egeland, “The world’s response to the tsunami was the best ever. Governments, the private sector, and individuals around the world opened their hearts and their wallets. Private donations for the tsunami [victims] eclipsed anything seen before” (para. 4). The BBC reports that local organizations and banks offered much in terms of emergency relief and reconstruction in affected areas. Among the large donors were countries such as Japan, Canada, Australia, and China. UN agencies also delivered aid as well as numerous charities. Rescue teams were sent by different countries to evacuate the wounded (BBC, 2005).

### **Government Performance**

Although they sometimes do not make the front page, issues such as the quality of aid or conditions of aid disbursement also get covered in the media. Information on aid

delivery allows the public to see how the affected governments make full use of donations and other forms of assistance. Thus, the performance of government officials is a topic that gets considerable media attention. During Hurricane Katrina, many news outlets questioned President Bush's insufficient reaction to the crisis and the slow pace of rescue and relief efforts. Journalistic skepticism of government intentions, especially in the face of inadequate actions, can therefore be exacerbated during times of crisis.

The foregoing potential foci of attention suggest that media coverage of natural disasters is multi-faceted. Generally speaking, every angle of a natural disaster is covered using various perspectives and techniques, which provides the public with a basic understanding of the catastrophe. Advancements in communication technology have led to the use of more visual, audio and video elements to better cover natural disasters. Visual aids are now employed extensively in recognition of the impact of striking images on public emotion and response. Both text and visuals are thus potent framing devices.

### **Framing Natural Disasters**

A number of studies have been conducted to examine how the media frame natural disasters. Previous framing research shows that, regardless of topic, four frames are more common. These are the conflict, human interest, responsibility, and economic consequences frames (Valkenburg et al., 1999). Of these, the responsibility frame is the most frequently used; the conflict frame is second. To a significant degree, the economic and human interest frames are used less frequently (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, in crisis situations, human interest can easily become the dominant frame. The functions of the mass media as suggested by the National Research Council Committee on Disasters (1980), including the social utility function as described by Dominick

(1996), suggest that human interest frames may indeed overshadow other frames in disaster coverage.

Rodriguez (2006), analyzing how television news framed Hurricane Katrina, found the coverage replete with information about “extensive damage, death and injury; concern for children, the ill and the elderly; the potential for mental health trauma; the absence of authority, extensive looting; the incompetence of government; and the inevitability of social disorder—in essence, a state of chaos and anarchy” (para. 5). He identified five framing themes: “finding damage, finding death, finding help, finding authority and finding the bad guys” (para. 5).

Television, Rodriguez (2006) observes, is always good at presenting damage. Damage can raise public sympathy and make catastrophes even in distant geographical locations relevant to viewers in different places. The media are also good in updating people on death tolls. Often, however, the estimated death toll in the initial period is unlikely to be the same as the final confirmed number. For example, the actual death rate from Katrina turned out to be lower than the initial estimate. Observers suggest that the predicted high death toll publicized at the beginning of the event may help “speed up efforts to provide assistance and disaster relief aid” (para. 11).

Another commonly occurring frame focuses on the assistance to victims in the immediate post-impact period. Aid may come from family members, neighbors, local communities, humanitarian agencies and organizations, and international communities. Media coverage of assistance can persuade the public to contribute and volunteer in the relief work.

The authority frame covers the performance of government officials at all levels. It is the responsibility of the media to find out—and let people know—who are in charge, and consequently must shoulder the blame for slow and incompetent relief efforts.

Finding the bad guy, another frame Rodriguez identified, refers to how residents in the damaged areas were portrayed, including all kinds of anti-social behavior they ostensibly displayed during the disaster, such as looting, suicide, and rape. In this sense, media coverage facilitates the impression of negative disaster behavior even though some of them are under-reported.

### **Frame Dynamics in Crises**

In a rapidly developing crisis, news frames do not always emerge with the same pattern. The news coverage is likely to use different frames as the event unfolds. Reynolds and Barnett (2003) states that in a crisis situation, journalists are likely to report what they directly observe and produce stories with less sophistication at the earlier stages. As the crisis evolves through time, the coverage extends in scope and depth, and frames become more sophisticated. For example, the damage frame in the coverage of a crisis at earlier stages is more frequently used, while the more complicated economic impact and human interest frames are more difficult to identify.

Media coverage of natural disasters has been studied extensively and these studies have found that news frames change over time. Graber (1980) suggested that there are three stages of crisis coverage. The media are the prime information sources for both the public and the government during the first stage with the function of describing what has happened and helping to coordinate relief operations (pp. 233-234). At the second stage, media coverage focuses on plans to “address the needs of the victims and to repair the damage” (Li, 2004, p. 4). The third stage overlaps the first two stages of media coverage.

In the case of the U.S. TV networks' coverage of the first 24 hours of 9/11, media coverage was primarily focused on the damage frame, during the first stage while the political frame emerged at the second stage. The use of the economy and safety frames increased significantly in the later hours of the second stage. During the third stage, the safety and human interest frames became dominant while the use of the political frame declined (Li, 2004).

### **Factors that Influence Media Frames**

There are several factors that affect how journalists develop media frames. According to Scheufele (1999), framing can be influenced by the context under which journalists operate. Research has shown that journalists are likely to "localize" a news story by targeting a certain audience segment. Journalists in different countries have been found to highlight different elements in their reports to fit the local cultural framework (Clausen, 2003).

Some scholars have examined the difference between media coverage of domestic natural disasters and those that occur in other countries. Worawongs et al. (2007), for example, explores how three major broadcast television networks in the United States (ABC, CBS and NBC) covered Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami, two natural disasters that have received unprecedented attention from the media around the world. Although they appeared the same in terms of their reporting of the magnitude of the catastrophe that often constitutes the surface layer of reporting, the geographic location of a disaster event largely determines differences in the coverage in the media system of a particular country. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, U.S. news coverage heavily scrutinized federal government actions. In this instance, the media acted more as "public informants" that kept the catastrophe at the top of America's national agenda. In

the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami, American journalists frequently highlighted human emotions perhaps to connect their audiences to the victims of a distant catastrophe. Such framing patterns also affect the way a disaster will be interpreted and remembered in history.

Some researchers have also observed that the amount of “global” news coverage is influenced by Western interests and a country’s own priorities and exigencies. For example, places where Westerners always travel (such as the tsunami-hit areas frequently visited by tourists) are more likely to get intensive coverage in the Western press. Countries that are of strategic interest to the U.S. in its “war on terrorism,” such as Pakistan, are also more likely to receive greater attention. Because a sizeable percentage of the United Kingdom’s immigrant population came from South Asia, the earthquake in Pakistan received considerable play in the British press. Natural disasters that take people by surprise get more sensational coverage; disasters that keep happening, such as the famines and droughts in Africa, are less likely to be covered because people are ostensibly already desensitized to them (Shah, 2005).

### **Differences between the Chinese and the US Media Systems**

Media coverage of the same issues and events vary from country to country, and the fundamental reason is that it is influenced by differences in politics, economy, culture, the media infrastructure and the system that supports it, and journalistic norms and values, among others. Differences between China and the United States can be found in every aspect. Among those differences, perhaps the most critical are those that pertain to the political and media systems.

The two countries differ in the political system under which their respective media outlets operate. China can be said to subscribe to the authoritarian-Communist model,

while the U.S. can be seen as espousing the libertarian-social responsibility model following Siebert et al.'s (1956) four theories of the press. Of these four theories, the authoritarian model has the longest history based as it was on “the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century English history and philosophy of the absolute power of the monarch” (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p. 310). Under the authoritarian press model, the goal of the media is to support and promote the policies of the state and help the government to achieve its objectives. Press reports against political leaders and the government in general are not allowed. The government owns the media and exercises effective control over them, including the “licensing system, censorship, special taxes, laws in the name of preserving the nation, such as treason and sedition” (p. 26). The media can criticize or police themselves and discussions of political systems are allowed, but there should be no direct criticism of “current political leaders and their projects or any overt attempt to unseat duly constituted authority” (p. 26).

The libertarian press model, on the other hand, holds that the press should be free from outside restrictions and that “the happiness and well-being of the individual is the goal of society” (Siebert et al., 1956, p. 40). The media are responsible for policing the government, informing and entertaining the public, and are considered as the government's watchdog. In this framework, most media organizations are privately owned although the government can step in when necessary.

The communist theory is based on Marxist ideology that values the concept of unity, including the unity of the working class and the ruling Party. The function of the press is to follow and carry out Party policies. Although there are privately-owned media, most media organizations under this model are state-owned. The government imposes



control and censorship over media content by stifling reviews and criticisms, and appointing editors, among other practices (Severin and Tankard, 2001).

The libertarian-based social responsibility theory was first developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the U.S. Commission on Freedom of the Press (Severin and Tankard, 2001). Under this model, press control is mainly exercised in the form of “community opinion, consumer action and professional ethics” (p. 130). The biggest difference between the social responsibility model and the libertarian model is the belief that “the media cannot perform responsibly if they do not do so voluntarily” (Yin, 2003, p. 7).

China and the United States do not fall neatly into just one of the four categories cited above. The Chinese media are enjoying relatively more freedom and diversity today and cannot be simply described as “communist.” In China, communism is best described as “communism with Chinese characteristics.” The Communist Party still owns most of the media organizations, especially the most influential ones, and the media are supposed to strictly follow Party rules and regulations. Generally, the media are not allowed to cover stories against the Party and the dominant ideology that hold sway over media content; journalists exercise self-censorship. The press is said to play the role of the Party “guard dog.” Although the Party allows the media to cover stories about government corruption and bribery, inequality or other social problems, the bottom line is that they should not criticize Party leadership and the prevailing ideology. Those who fail to toe the line receive direct or indirect punishment. If an article becomes “too radical” for the leaders’ taste, the writer can be fired or transferred to other departments. However, recent reform policies have brought unprecedented freedom to journalists. For example, after the Sichuan earthquake, domestic and foreign journalists were allowed to visit the disaster

areas, and reporters were permitted to interview victims, practices that were unheard of in previous regimes.

Journalists in the U.S. and those who consume the information they disseminate have freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the country's constitution. The free flow of ideas gives the public opportunity to discern what is true or false, allowing people to make their own choices regarding issues and events. In the U.S., most media companies are privately owned and are relatively free from government interference most of the time. Owners rarely attempt to control the media; the media are more likely to be "controlled" by their audiences. The American media are the most market-driven in the world. Commercial considerations become increasingly important as the media expand. However, many have bemoaned that a culture of consumerism has made media managers more concerned about increasing revenues rather than performing their public service function (Woods, 2007).

### **The evolution of Mass Media in China**

Before 1978, the major function of the Chinese media was, in effect, Party propaganda. According to media practitioners at that time, "our words must be the words of the Communist Party, of the class, of the people. Every sentence or action should be represented by the interests of the Party Central Committee" (Li and Liu, 2009, para. 7). Since the reform and opening-up policy was enunciated in 1978, many changes have taken place in the Chinese mass media.

By 1982, many have begun to distinguish between journalism and propaganda, leading to the realization that the primary function of the news media and the "basis of the media's existence" is to "transmit information to society" (Li and Liu, 2009, para. 10).

Newspapers, radio and television broadcasts were dominated by market and economic news.

In the 1990s, the mass media were characterized as a superstructure in and of themselves, espousing a strong ideology and supporting a tertiary industry that is supposed to inform, educate, and entertain the public (Li and Liu, 2009). The media were to uphold the leadership of the Party and were expected to support profitable enterprises. Consequently, weekly newspapers, evening papers and daily newspapers increased their circulation and advertising income. Television programs also enjoyed substantial popularity among the public.

It has been observed that the media industry turned into a system with “multiple structures” after the mid-1990s. The collectivization of the Chinese media industry started in 1996 when newspaper and broadcast groups emerged with unrivaled competitiveness. The Chinese media industry morphed anew into a structure with four categories: political media, institutional media, institutional media run by enterprises, and media enterprises (Li and Liu, 2009).

New types of outlets, including blogs, podcasts, and mobile TV developed rapidly since the Internet became such an integral part of people’s lives. It ensured the quick exchange of information among individuals and groups, offering the public a platform for free expression. Netizens have been closely participating in a number of big news events in China, such as the March 14<sup>th</sup> Tibet riot, the Sichuan earthquake, and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The free flow of information and freedom of speech have thus accelerated improvements in government policies regarding the role of the media in society and the quality of media coverage.

Will new ways of doing things produce a more responsive coverage of natural disaster events? How does the current Chinese media system perform against its U.S. counterpart in reporting about crisis situations?

Considering the foregoing literature review and theoretical framework, this study attempts to determine the dominant frames used in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in Chinese and American newspapers. It examines frames as the dependent variable influenced by the nature of a country's media system, journalistic routines, and political ideology. The following research questions are asked:

RQ1: What are the dominant frames used in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in the Chinese newspapers?

RQ2: What are the dominant frames used in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in the American newspapers?

RQ3: Is there a difference in the types of frames employed by the newspapers in these two countries?

RQ4: Did the frames applied by the Chinese and American newspapers differ as coverage progressed?

## Chapter 3

### Method

This study aims (1) to find out what frames the four newspapers—China's *People's Daily* and *West China City Daily* as well as America's *Washington Post* and *New York Times*—used to cover the Sichuan earthquake and the differences between and among them in this regard, and (2) to determine the difference between the two countries in terms of the frames their newspapers applied to cover the Sichuan earthquake over time.

To gather data for this study, a content analysis of the four newspapers was conducted. Content analysis is a method of analyzing textual and/or visual content of communication materials in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000).

#### **The sample and the unit of analysis**

Straight news reports about the Sichuan earthquake from the *People's Daily*, the *West China City Daily*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were analyzed in this study.

The Chinese-language *People's Daily*, published worldwide with a circulation of 3 to 4 million, is the mouthpiece and official newspaper of the Communist Party. Founded in 1948, the *People's Daily* has been providing information about the policies and viewpoints of the Party and thus functions as the chief information source in the country. It approves the topics and the stories that see print, and its editorials are regarded as

authoritative statements of government policy. The *People's Daily* has three editions (the mainland edition, the Hong Kong edition and the overseas edition). It began an online edition in 1997 with a web bulletin forum that has been known for its candid content. According to the World Association of Newspapers, the *People's Daily* is one of two national Chinese newspapers in its top 100 world daily newspapers by circulation in 2010 (*People's Daily Online*, 2010)..

The *West China City Daily* is the most influential local newspaper in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province. It enjoys high credibility as evidenced by increased readership over the span of the earthquake coverage.

The English-language *Washington Post* is a premiere U.S. newspaper published in the nation's capital, Washington D.C., and is widely read by policymakers and the intellectual elite. It is well known for its coverage of national politics and international affairs.

The *New York Times* has its largest circulation in the state of New York and is often selected by policymakers and researchers to decipher the public agenda. Both American newspapers are said to be "trend-setters," setting the agenda of other media outlets as well.

The timeframe of the study begins from May 12, 2008, the day the earthquake hit Sichuan province, and ends on July 31, 2008, one week before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were held.

News articles from the *People's Daily* and the *West China City Daily* were collected from the papers' official websites (<http://search.peopledaily.com.cn> and <http://www.wccdaily.com.cn>, respectively) that also archived news reports. The relevant articles were collected using “Sichuan di zhen,” the Chinese translation of the Sichuan earthquake, as search terms. “Sichuan earthquake” was also used as the search term for news articles published in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. All articles from the American papers were retrieved from the LexisNexis Academic database.

Because the search produced a disproportionately larger number of articles from the Chinese papers, a sample from the collection of Chinese articles was selected using simple random sampling technique. Applying this method, 160 news stories were randomly drawn from a total of 2,057 reports culled from the two Chinese newspapers. The search for relevant articles in the American newspapers produced only 91 news stories. All of these were analyzed in this study. Thus, a total of 251 articles were analyzed, including 90 from the *People's Daily*, 70 from the *West China City Daily*, 41 from the *Washington Post*, and 50 from the *New York Times*, over a period of three months. Editorials, letters to the editor, and other commentary pieces were excluded from the analysis.

The unit of analysis for the study was the complete news article.

### **Variables and their measurement**

**Frames.** A frame is the overarching framework or “hook” journalists use to structure a story. To determine frames, each news article was analyzed to identify the

dominant themes. The frame was identified from the focus or angle of news stories.

Because an article may exhibit several frames, the first three frames observed were coded.

In this study, the dominant frame (represented by the variable Frame 1) is defined as the most pervasive frame observed in the entire news report. Frame 2 and Frame 3 are the second and third detected frames, respectively. They were seen as complementary to the dominant frame.

The frames coded in this study had been identified from previous content analysis studies of media coverage of natural disasters. These generic frames include: (1) government policies, actions and response, (2) human mortality, (3) damage to infrastructure, the economy, and to the environment, (4) reconstruction efforts, (5) relief efforts, (6) public health, (7) survivor frames.

A natural disaster inevitably causes casualties and damage, the reason why the human mortality frame and the damage frame were included in this study. It is important to keep the public updated with information regarding the performance of government before, during, and after an emergency or crisis event to keep the public's faith in the government intact and to maintain social stability. Thus, the government policies, actions and response frame, the reconstruction frame, and the relief effort frame were also included in the analysis. Natural disaster reporting often highlights the victims' personal experience, feelings, and well-being to better engage audiences. All of these characteristics are often exhibited in the generic survivor frame. The health frame was also investigated because public health is always a major concern in calamity situations.



The following examples demonstrate the application of each of these frames in the news reports.

The *government policies, actions and response* frame is exhibited by stories that discussed government officials and agencies; the actions of government at the national, provincial and local levels; and the policies already in place or were initiated in response to the crisis. Examples of lead paragraphs that demonstrate this frame follow:

Members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Central Committee, as well as Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao boarded a hastily-prepared plane to the quake-hit counties within two hours of the tremors. Their mission: To comfort victims and oversee rescue efforts. --

The *People's Daily*, May 13, 2008

Soldiers, paramilitary police and civilian rescue workers struggled against rainstorms and fog early Tuesday to reach thousands of people trapped under the rubble of schools, hospitals and homes collapsed by Monday's deadly earthquake in central China. -- *Washington Post*, May 14, 2008

The *human mortality* frame deals with reports of deaths as a consequence of the earthquake, including descriptions of how people died and/or were injured. The following lead paragraphs exhibit the use of this frame:

Most of the damage appeared to be in Sichuan province where as many as 5,000 people died and 10,000 were injured in one county alone... The collapse of one

high school left 1,000 students and teachers dead or missing... as many as 900 students were trapped beneath the rubble of another town's devastated high school.

-- *Washington Post*, May 13, 2008

Two thousand more people were found dead and as many as 18,000 were believed buried under debris in the area surrounding the city of Mianyang... The discovery brought to 12,000 the number of people confirmed killed by the tremor, a toll that looks likely to climb as more of the victims in Mianyang and other hard-hit towns are uncovered. -- *Washington Post*, May 14, 2008

The *damage frame* is displayed in stories that discuss damage to infrastructure, to the ecology and to the environment as well as economic losses resulting from the earthquake. The following paragraphs demonstrate the application of this frame:

At least two large schools, each with nearly 1,000 students, were reduced to piles of concrete dust and debris... Two chemical factories in Shifang were destroyed, spilling 80 tons of toxic liquid ammonia, forcing 6,000 people to evacuate their homes. The destruction of a steam turbine factory in the city of Mianzhu killed at least 60 workers and left 500 others missing. -- *New York Times*, May 13, 2008

Ten power stations in and around Sichuan were knocked out... Dozens of its stations and 60 of its drilling rigs also stopped operations. Additionally, about 400 dams were damaged by the quake. All roads around the Huaneng Group's

Taipingyi hydroelectric plant collapsed, and 50 workers remained trapped. --

*Washington Post*, May 19, 2008

The *reconstruction* frame features efforts intended to rebuild and restore the normal social order. A story that describes how people set up new dwellings or start new businesses after the earthquake is coded under this category. The following are examples of news bits that exemplify this frame:

Branches of the Agricultural Department and the Department of Water

Conservancy in Sichuan province as well as farmers in the hardest hit areas jointly planned for farm production to compensate for losses accrued during the earthquake. -- *The People's Daily*, June 2, 2008

Local government agencies set up a variety of programs to help unemployed people affected by the Sichuan earthquake to support themselves, seek reemployment, and find their own ways of livelihood. -- *The West China City Daily*, July 9, 2008

The *relief effort* frame refers to supplies of money, food and other donations and aid from local people, volunteers, foreign governments and their citizens, and non-governmental organizations, among others. Stories that discussed how donations were distributed to the victims were also placed under this frame category. The following excerpts from news reports exhibit this frame:

Forty members of a private car club in Chengdu, Sichuan's provincial capital, made multiple trips transporting more than 100 injured people out of the devastated city of Shifang. Others have filled their cars or sport utility vehicles with supplies and driven hundreds of miles to Sichuan's mountains. -- *New York Times*, May 20, 2008

In addition to groups throughout the Chinese diaspora, Taiwan's government and private sector have provided China with assistance...The Taiwanese government plans to donate a total of \$67 million in aid, and private companies have donated about \$83 million...In addition, Taiwan's new president, Ma Ying-jeou, who is viewed as more pro-Chinese than his predecessor, has donated \$6,500 of his own money to inspire "all individuals in Taiwan" to help. -- *New York Times*, June 1, 2008

The *health frame* can be seen in stories that discussed physical injury and harm, mental suffering, as well as the impact of the natural disaster on public health. The following paragraph demonstrates the use of this frame:

People have a sense of panic and dare not go into the factory to work...And residents are hoarding medicine and donning face masks in areas that public health officials have said are free of disease. -- *Washington Post*, May 19, 2008

The *survivor frame* refers to the personal experience of individuals, families and other groups directly or indirectly affected by the disaster. These articles often have high

emotional impact. People portrayed as helpless victims and reports of spontaneous acts of assistance fall under this category. The following paragraphs exhibit this frame:

Students in quake-hit areas are to sit for the national college entrance exam, which was delayed by the May 12 earthquake. Ma Wei, a senior from Yuli County, said: “I appreciate the concern and help from the government and from people from all walks of life. We students in the quake-hit areas will show our appreciation to the entire country with our best performance.” -- *West China City Daily*, June 26, 2008

Zheng Minyan, 44, who was under a blue tarp with a dozen of his family members and a small dog, believed his house was still standing and that he would return Wednesday to assess whether his family might be able to move back in. “We’re not doing too bad here,” Zheng said, smiling and taking a drag on his cigarette. -- *Washington Post*, May 14, 2008

Frames that cannot be neatly categorized into any of the seven frames listed above fall under the *other* category. The following are examples:

Several parents wanted an investigation into the construction quality of school buildings in Dujiangyan. They say six schoolhouses collapsed in the city, even as other government buildings remain standing. One man said officials built two additional stories on the Xinjian school even though it had failed a safety

inspection two years ago – allegations that could not be verified. -- *New York Times*, May 15, 2008

Parents of the estimated 10,000 children who lost their lives in the quake have grown so enraged about collapsed schools that they have overcome their usual caution about confronting Communist Party officials. Many say they are especially upset that some schools for poor students crumbled into rubble even though government offices and more elite schools not far away survived the May 12 quake largely intact. -- *New York Times*, May 28, 2008

### **Intercoder reliability**

Reliability refers to the extent to which the measuring method yields the same result over repeated trials (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). When used in content analysis, it translates into intercoder reliability, which represents the amount of agreement between or among two or more coders (Neuendorf, 2002).

Two graduate students were trained to code for the variables of interest in this study. They used a sample of natural disaster-related articles to be more familiar with the coding categories. Intercoder reliability was determined by calculating for Cohen's kappa coefficient (Popping, 1988). The results for the three nominal variables involved in this study show that the intercoder reliability for all frames was excellent, ranging from 0.83 to 1 (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of inter-coder reliability test for the study's variables

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Paper	1	.000
Date	1	.000
Length	1	.000
Frame1	1	.000
Frame2	.834	.000
Frame3	.845	.000

## Chapter 4

### Results

This study examines two Chinese newspapers and two American newspapers in terms of the frames these publications applied to cover the Sichuan earthquake. The objective is to determine the dominant frames and the difference in the frames used by these newspapers from two countries to cover the same natural catastrophe.

The three-month period of analysis, from May to July 2008, produced a total of 251 news stories (Table 2). Of these, the *People's Daily* provided 90 news stories, comprising approximately 36% of the sample. The *West China City Daily* produced 70 articles or 28% of the sample. The third highest number of news stories came from the *New York Times* (n=50, 20%), followed by the *Washington Post* (n=41, 16%). In summary, 64% of the sample came from newspapers published in China; 36% of the articles saw print in American newspapers. Although there were fewer U.S. news reports, the stories in the American papers were relatively longer as evidenced by the average number of words. The *New York Times* articles, for example, were generally longer than the stories featured in the *People's Daily* by 80 words (Table 2).



Table 2. The study sample

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Number of stories</b>	<b>Percent of total sample</b>	<b>Average length of stories (number of words)</b>
<i>People's Daily</i>	90	36	955
<i>West China City Daily</i>	70	28	730
<i>Washington Post</i>	41	16	965
<i>New York Times</i>	50	20	1,035

### **The Chinese newspaper frames**

The first research question asks about the dominant frames used in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in the Chinese newspapers. A total of 160 newspaper articles were coded to answer this research question. First, the most dominant frame was determined. As Table 3 outlines, in terms of the first dominant frame, the government policies, actions and response frame (n=78) was most frequently used, present in 48.75% of the total number of frames detected. Stories using this frame included items such as Premier Wen Jiabao's quick departure for Sichuan immediately after the earthquake, how rescue teams were dispatched to the affected regions, and government leaders urging rescue workers to save people's lives.

The second most frequently used frame was that which focused on relief efforts (32.50%). Stories that portrayed lay people and celebrities donating to the rescue initiatives exemplify the use of this frame. Articles that adopt this frame also discuss how people volunteered for the rescue efforts in droves, and how international aid was distributed.

The third most commonly used frame discussed reconstruction (6.25%). Articles that applied this frame described how telecommunication services were restored after the

earthquake, how schools were being rebuilt, and the cooperative programs set up to assist people in finding new jobs.

The survivor frame (5.63%) was evident in stories that had high emotional impact. Stories that employed this frame described how victims survived the ordeal, how parents sacrificed their lives to protect their children, and individual stories of valor displayed in dealing with the catastrophe. One story told of a primary school student who just lost her father and ended up saving the lives of several classmates.

The damage frame (1.88%) was shown in stories that described how the earthquake destroyed buildings still under construction and the tremors' adverse impact on real estate sales. Another story that demonstrated this frame also discussed how an ethnic group, the Qiang, and its culture were almost demolished in the aftermath of the disaster.

The human mortality frame (1.25%) and the health frame (1.25%) constituted a very small percentage of the total. Stories that exhibited the human mortality frame tallied the casualties and discussed how hundreds of students were buried in the rubble when the school buildings collapsed. They also depicted in some detail the bodies recovered from the debris. The health frame was exemplified by stories that dealt with the victims' psychological travails, the spread of diseases that go with the aftermath of a quake, and general injuries to people.

The stories were also coded for the second dominant frame. The findings show that the reconstruction (29.63%) and the survivor frames (29.63%) were most applied to

the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake, followed by “other” frames (12.96%), the relief effort frame (11.11%), the government policies, actions and response frame (9.26%), the damage frame (5.56%) and the human mortality frame (1.85%).

In terms of the third dominant frame, the reconstruction and the relief effort frames were used twice, each constituting 28.57% of the third frames applied, while the government polices, actions and response, health, and the survivor frames each contributed 14.29% of the total number of third frames detected. The breakdown of these frames is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The first, second and third dominant frames observed in the Chinese and American newspapers

	China		U.S.	
	n	% of total	n	% of total
<b>Frame 1</b>				
Government	78	48.75	15	16.48
Mortality	2	1.25	18	19.78
Damage	3	1.88	12	13.19
Reconstruction	10	6.25	0	0.00
Relief effort	52	32.50	9	9.89
Health	2	1.25	2	2.20
Survivor	9	5.63	19	20.88
Other	4	2.50	16	17.58
Total	160		91	
<b>Frame 2</b>				
Government	5	9.26	8	12.12
Mortality	1	1.85	17	25.76
Damage	3	5.56	15	22.73
Reconstruction	16	29.63	0	0.00
Relief effort	6	11.11	6	9.09
Health	0	0.00	0	0.00
Survivor	16	29.63	10	15.15
Other	7	12.96	10	15.15
Total	54		66	
<b>Frame 3</b>				
Government	1	14.29	11	32.35
Mortality	0	0.00	6	17.65
Damage	0	0.00	7	20.59
Reconstruction	2	28.57	0	0.00
Relief effort	2	28.57	0	0.00
Health	1	14.29	0	0.00
Survivor	1	14.29	5	14.71
Other	0	0.00	5	14.71
Total	7		34	

A summary of general frame use shown in Table 4 shows that the government policies, actions and response frame (n=84) dominated the Chinese newspapers, followed

by the relief effort (n=60), the reconstruction (n=28), and the survivor frames (n=26). The “other” frames (n=11), the damage frame (n=6), the health frame (n=3), and the human mortality frame (n=3) were also used, but these did not constitute a large portion of the story hooks observed in the coverage.

### **The American newspaper frames**

The second research question asks about the dominant frames used in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in the American newspapers. A total of 91 articles were coded to answer this research question. The results are summarized in Table 3.

In terms of the first dominant frame, the survivor frame was most frequently used (20.88%) in the U.S. papers. Articles that employed this frame talked about how the earthquake victims coped with the disaster. For example, many stories described how Sichuan residents were separated from family members who were in other parts of the country during the earthquake in search of work, and how thousands of survivors fled tent camps and villages to avoid overflowing lakes and rivers.

The second most frequently used was the human mortality frame (19.78%), which generally reported on the body toll and described how the dead were gathered and prepared for burial.

There were many “other” frames (17.58%) detected, including articles that indicated that the earthquake “opened a crack in Chinese censorship.” Another article criticized the Chinese government for ignoring the signs and warnings that a natural disaster was imminent.

The government policies, actions and response frame constituted 16.48% of the total. How China mobilized 30,000 additional soldiers to the earthquake-shattered expanses of the nation's southwestern regions is a topic discussed using this frame. Another story talked about China's appeal for international aid.

The damage frame (13.19%) was exemplified by articles that described the collapse of school buildings and showing concern about the pandas in the Sichuan reserve. The relief effort frame (9.89%) was exhibited by stories that described how Chinese citizens residing in the U.S. contributed millions of dollars to the relief efforts, as well as donations from a host of individuals and groups. The health frame (2.20%) was evident in articles that worried about public panic and people suffering from the so-called "crush syndrome."

The second most frequently observed frame in the American papers were the human mortality frame (25.76%), followed by the damage frame (22.73%), the survivor frame (15.15%), "other" frames (15.15%), the government policies, actions and response frame (12.12%), and the relief effort frame (9.09%).

In terms of the third dominant frame, the government policies, actions and response frame (32.35%) was the most frequently detected, followed by the damage frame (20.59%), the human mortality frame (17.65%), the survivor frame (14.71%) and other frames (14.71%).

A summary of frame use in the U.S. newspapers, also shown in Table 4, indicates that the human mortality frame was the most dominant frame (n=41) in the American

reports, followed by the government policies, actions and response frame (n=34), the damage frame (n=34), the survivor frame (n=34), and the “other” frames (n=31), in that order. The relief effort (n=15) and health frames (n=2) were also observed, but these constituted a small percentage of the frames detected in the coverage. The reconstruction frame was conspicuously absent in the American newspapers.

In comparison, the frames that dealt with government policies, actions and response, and the relief effort frames were dominant in the Chinese newspapers, but the U.S. coverage tended to focus more on the human mortality frame. Although the casualties were high, this frame was not the most prominent in the Chinese reports.

Table 4. Summary of the dominant frames in the Chinese and American newspapers

	China		U.S.	
	n	% of total	n	% of total
Government	84	38.01	34	17.80
Mortality	3	1.36	41	21.47
Damage	6	2.71	34	17.80
Reconstruction	28	12.67	0	0.00
Relief effort	60	27.15	15	7.85
Health	3	1.36	2	1.05
Survivor	26	11.76	34	17.80
Other	11	4.98	31	16.23
Total	221		191	

### Differences in frame use

The third research question asks whether there was any difference between the Chinese and the American newspapers in terms of the frames used to cover the Sichuan earthquake. To answer this research question, a chi-square test was conducted. The results, shown in Table 5, indicate significant differences in the use of the first frame

employed by the newspapers from the two countries ( $X^2=100.594$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The Chinese newspapers were inclined to use government policies, actions and response (n=78) as the primary frame. The Chinese papers also substantially employed the relief effort frame (n=52) to anchor reports about this natural disaster. In contrast, the frames found in the American newspapers were more diverse, covering the gamut of all available frames coded.

Table 5. Chi-square analysis showing the difference between Chinese and American newspapers in terms of the first dominant frame (Frame 1)

	China	America	Total
Government	78	15	93
Mortality	2	18	20
Damage	3	12	15
Reconstruction	10	0	10
Relief effort	52	9	61
Health	2	2	4
Survivor	9	19	28
Other	4	16	20
Total	160	91	251

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	100.594	7	.000
Likelihood ratio	106.781	7	.000
Linear-by-linear association	16.856	1	.000
N of valid cases	251		

Is there a difference in terms of the second frame employed? The results of another chi-square test conducted to answer this question, shown in Table 6, indicate



significant differences between the two newspapers in this regard ( $X^2=40.029$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The Chinese newspapers most frequently used the reconstruction ( $n=16$ ) and the survivor frames ( $n=16$ ) as the second most dominant story hooks, while the American newspapers made more use of the human mortality ( $n=17$ ) and the damage frames ( $n=15$ ) as the secondary anchoring device.

Table 6. Chi-square analysis showing the difference between Chinese and American newspapers in terms of the second frame used (Frame 2)

	China	America	Total
Government	5	8	13
Mortality	1	17	18
Damage	3	15	18
Reconstruction	16	0	16
Relief effort	6	6	12
Survivor	16	10	26
Other	7	10	17
Total	54	66	120

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	40.029	6	.000
Likelihood ratio	49.569	6	.000
Linear-by-linear association	6.230	1	.013
N of valid cases	120		

The Chinese and U.S. papers were also significantly different in terms of the third frame deployed based on the results of another chi-square test shown in Table 7

( $X^2=28.640$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p=.001$ ). The Chinese newspapers used all available frames, but more

frequently exhibited the complementary human mortality and damage frames. The American papers, on the other hand, more frequently employed government policies, actions and response, human mortality, and damage frames to enrich the coverage.

Table 7. Chi-square analysis showing the difference between Chinese and American newspapers in terms of the third frame used (Frame 3)

	China	U.S.	Total
Government	1	11	12
Mortality	0	6	6
Damage	0	7	7
Reconstruction	2	0	2
Relief effort	2	0	2
Health	1	0	1
Survivor	1	5	6
Other	0	5	5
Total	7	34	41

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	28.640	7	.000
Likelihood ratio	25.187	7	.001
Linear-by-linear association	.970	1	.325
N of valid cases	41		

The fourth research question asks whether framing patterns changed as the coverage progressed. A series of chi-square tests was conducted to respond to this research question. The results in the case of the Chinese newspapers reveal no statistically significant difference in the use of the first and the third frames (Tables 8 and 10), but

there was a significant difference in the use of the second frame ( $X^2=24.779$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=.016$ ). As the results in Table 9 suggest, the reconstruction frame, relatively absent during the first month of the coverage, was more frequently detected at a later time. The table also shows that more frames were deployed to cover the topic as the coverage evolved.

Table 8. Chi-square analysis showing no difference in the use of Frame 1 in the Chinese newspapers over time

	May	June	July	Total
Government	16	34	28	78
Mortality	1	0	1	2
Damage	0	2	1	3
Reconstruction	0	3	7	10
Relief effort	18	16	18	52
Health	0	0	2	2
Survivor	2	3	4	9
Other	1	2	1	4
Total	38	60	62	160

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	16.230	14	.300
Likelihood ratio	19.663	14	.141
Linear-by-linear association	.068	1	.795
N of valid cases	160		

Table 9. Chi-square analysis showing a difference in the use of Frame 2 in the Chinese newspapers over time

	May	June	July	Total
Government	3	2	0	5
Mortality	1	0	0	1
Damage	1	0	2	3
Reconstruction	0	4	12	16
Relief effort	0	3	3	6
Survivor	3	6	7	16
Other	0	2	5	7
Total	8	17	29	54

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	24.779	12	.016
Likelihood ratio	27.282	12	.007
Linear-by-linear association	3.303	1	.069
N of valid cases	54		

Table 10. Chi-square analysis showing no difference in the use of Frame 3 in the Chinese newspapers over time

	May	June	July	Total
Government	1	0	0	1
Reconstruction	0	1	1	2
Relief effort	0	1	1	2
Health	0	0	1	1
Survivor	0	0	1	1
Total	1	2	4	7

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	8.750	8	.364
Likelihood ratio	7.835	8	.450
Linear-by-linear association	3.949	1	.047
N of valid cases	7		

Over the three-month period, there was no significant difference found in the use of the second and the third frames (Tables 12 and 13, respectively) in the American newspapers. However, a significant difference was observed in the use of the first frame ( $X^2=30.658$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=.002$ ). As Table 11 shows, in general, fewer frames were employed as the U.S. coverage evolved, but the human mortality, government, and survivor frames hogged much of the newspaper frames at the onset of the coverage.

Table 11. Chi-square analysis showing a difference in the use of Frame 1 in the American newspapers over time

	Month			Total
	May	June	July	
Government	13	1	1	15
Mortality	15	3	0	18
Damage	8	4	0	12
Relief effort	6	3	0	9
Health	2	0	0	2
Survivor	13	5	1	19
Other	7	2	7	16
Total	64	18	9	91

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	30.658	12	.002
Likelihood ratio	26.959	12	.008
Linear-by-linear association	9.784	1	.002
N of valid cases	91		

Table 12. Chi-square analysis showing no difference in the use of Frame 2 in the American newspapers over time

	May	June	July	Total
Government	6	2	0	8
Mortality	11	2	4	17
Damage	13	2	0	15
Relief effort	6	0	0	6
Survivor	8	2	0	10
Other	8	2	0	10
Total	52	10	4	66

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	14.329	10	.158
Likelihood ratio	14.457	10	.153
Linear-by-linear association	1.647	1	.199
N of valid cases	66		



Table 13. Chi-square analysis showing no difference in the use of Frame 3 in the American newspapers over time

	May	June	July	Total
Government	10	1	0	11
Mortality	5	1	0	6
Damage	6	0	1	7
Survivor	3	2	0	5
Other	4	1	0	5
Total	28	5	1	34

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	7.823	8	.451
Likelihood ratio	7.510	8	.483
Linear-by-linear association	.748	1	.387
N of valid cases	34		

The results of this study reveal that the government policies, actions and response frame was most dominant in the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in the Chinese newspapers, followed by the relief effort frame. Together, these two frames comprised approximately 70% of all detected story frameworks. The damage frame and the human mortality frame were used rarely, but were prominent in the American coverage.

In the American newspapers, the human mortality frame (which did not occupy a substantial space in the Chinese papers) was the most dominant. The frequency of its use was followed by the use of the government policies, actions and response frame, the damage frame, the survivor frame, and the “other” frames. The relief effort frame constituted a small percentage of all frames observed in the U.S. papers. There were

statistically significant differences between the Chinese and American newspapers in terms of the first three frames applied in the stories.

Did frame use change over time? The results show that in the case of the Chinese newspapers, there was no significant difference in the use of the first and the third frame as the coverage progressed. A significant difference, however, was observed in the use of the second frame, with the reconstruction frame used more frequently at the later stage of the coverage. The American newspapers did not show any significant difference in their use of the second and the third frames. However, a significant difference was found in the use of the first frame. That is, the human mortality, the government, and the survivor frames were more noticeable at the first month of the coverage.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Conclusions

Using news stories from two Chinese newspapers and two American newspapers, this study examined the dominant frames and the differences in framing patterns applied during the three-month coverage of the devastating Sichuan earthquake to audiences in the two countries.

The findings indicate that the newspapers from China and the U.S. employed different frames to cover this disaster. In particular, the Chinese newspapers made use of the government policies, actions and response, and the relief effort frames to report the earthquake to their publics. However, frames that were likely to arouse strong feelings and emphasize the initial consequences of the disaster, such as the human mortality and damage frames, dominated the American coverage from the beginning. Both countries paid attention to the performance of the Chinese government, but the Chinese newspapers did so with greater frequency than their American counterparts. While the Chinese newspapers emphasized relief and reconstruction efforts, the U.S. newspapers seldom made use of these story hooks. In fact, the reconstruction frame was noticeably absent in the American coverage.

#### Frames Used in the Chinese Newspapers

Of the frames used by the Chinese papers, the government policies, actions and response frame was detected the most, accounting for over one-third of the frames

observed. This suggests that the Chinese press closely monitored how the government implemented a coordinated response, how it tried to handle the emergency, and how it marshaled resources for rescue. Indeed, after the earthquake, the central Chinese government and the local governments immediately carried out rescue operations and other measures to bring the disaster area under control. The Chinese newspapers reported on the government leaders' quick reaction, updating the public as to how officials performed during the time of crisis. Positive coverage of official response established the public's confidence on the government, which may have assisted in the maintenance of national unity and stability. Although the government was somehow blamed for poor building construction standards that caused the collapse of school buildings and the deaths of pupils, the government received a generally positive play throughout the Chinese coverage.

The relief effort frame was the second most used frame in the Chinese newspapers. The destructive aftermath of the earthquake and the plight of victims elicited great concern from the domestic and international community. Local residents, volunteers, relief agencies and organizations, foreign governments and their citizens offered supplies of money, food and other aid to people in the affected areas. Many participated in the rescue operations, which also played an important role in upholding national solidarity. This frame also included discussions of how well the Chinese government made use of the donations and international assistance.

The reconstruction and survivor frames were used less frequently despite the fact that the devastating consequences took more time and effort for full recovery. However, these two frames gradually became prominent as the coverage progressed. Media attention also shifted to the personal accounts of victims and their efforts to return to normalcy after the tremors.

The damage and human mortality frames made up a very small percentage of the frames observed in the Chinese newspapers. This may be because emphasizing these frames might redirect attention from what was considered the more crucial official response. The health frame was also used very infrequently to the neglect of any meaningful discourse regarding the victims' general and psychological welfare.

Overall, heavy positive coverage of government policies, actions and response placed this natural disaster at the top of the Chinese national agenda, and news stories about government performance helped set up a positive image of the leadership among domestic and international audiences. In effect, the media played the role of a "guard dog" for the Party, upholding the government and the dominant ideology. Timely and accurate reports eased the public's panic and responded to the public's information needs.

### **Frames Used in the American Newspapers**

The American newspapers used more diverse frames to cover the incident. Of the many frames the U.S. papers deployed, the most frequently applied were the human mortality and the damage frames. American journalists had to overcome geographical constraints in covering this natural disaster. In order to generate a connection between the

Sichuan earthquake victims and the American public, journalists tended to employ frames that depicted casualties and damage to homes, businesses, and public property. Such vivid depictions made the event salient to American audiences halfway around the globe.

The survivor frame also received considerable space in the American newspapers. The victims' accounts of family members lost to the quakes, injuries and psychological harm, produced stories high in human interest that elicited strong feelings of sympathy.

Government policies, actions and response often appeared as the third frame in the American reports. Some stories that demonstrated this frame criticized the Chinese government for the roughshod construction of school buildings that immediately succumbed to the tremors and caused the lost of school children. Others questioned the viability of China's insurance system. A few blamed the Chinese propaganda system for failing to meet the people's real information needs. Nonetheless, this frame clearly took a back seat to the vivid descriptions of casualties and damages.

The American newspapers also did not fully exploit the relief effort and health frames. The reconstruction frame, commonly found in the Chinese coverage, was conspicuously absent in the U.S. accounts.

### **Comparison between the Chinese and American Newspapers**

In summary, the government policies, actions and response frame was heavily employed by the Chinese newspapers while the American newspapers were more likely to use this story hook as a complementary or secondary frame. The human mortality and damage frames were more prevalent in the American newspapers, comprising

approximately 21% and 18%, respectively, of the total frames detected. The relief effort frame made up 27% of the total frames used by the Chinese newspapers, but constituted only 8% of the frames in the American sub-sample. The reconstruction frame that emphasized the restoration of affected areas played an important role in the Chinese newspapers as the coverage progressed, but was totally missing throughout the American coverage.

The results suggest that the Chinese media, performing their role as a “guard dog,” had a stronger sense of responsibility to uphold the Party’s leadership, maintain national unity and stability, and reestablish the public’s confidence after a domestic natural disaster. The American media constructed the Sichuan earthquake in a more emotional manner due perhaps to the desire to bridge the geographical divide between the two nations.

### **Implications of the Findings to Theory and Disaster Reporting**

Based on the findings of this study, there are several implications for media’s coverage of natural disasters.

First, international natural disaster coverage is often challenged by geographical constraints. Thus, there is a constant tendency to apply emotion-arousing frames such as human mortality and damage to connect audiences in different parts of the world to a far-flung calamity. Borah and Bulla (2006), examining how American, British and Indian newspapers framed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina by analyzing photographs published during the first week after the calamities hit, showed that the

American newspapers' visual coverage of the domestic calamity (Katrina) was more restrained. Britain, which was far from where the two natural disasters occurred, heavily relied on damage and emotional frames to report on the incident in their newspapers.

Worawongs (2007), after investigating whether geographic location affected the construction of TV news of Katrina and the tsunami, found that American media networks extensively used the human interest approach to convey the physical and emotional magnitude of the disaster wrought by the Indian Ocean tsunami. Given that journalists have less access to information and sources when reporting on natural disasters that happen in foreign soils, affective frames, which stimulate people's emotional responses, help to better engage the public and whet their interest on the unfolding events. Bringing news stories to such a level could "help the reader identify with the happenings in the story and thus make the reader feel more concern for what is going on" (Ghanem, 1997, p. 13).

Second, news framing is influenced by a country's media system as well as the ideology under which that media system operates. Although news values have already been developed for long to objectively provide high-quality news stories for audiences, editors are still personally subjective when deciding what to cover and how to cover it (White, 1950). Professionals "do not work in isolation, but must meet the expectations of their organizations" (Hirsch, 1977, p. 21). Thus, the media and those who work in the industry play different roles under certain political systems. Depending on the extent to which the government holds control over the media systems, national



interest—specifically, the need to restore order and stability after a calamity— becomes an integral concern of disaster reporting.

The watchdog group Reporters without Borders ranked China 168 out of 175 countries in its 2010 worldwide index of press freedom. China’s constitution affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but the document contains broad language that says Chinese citizens must defend “the security, honor, and interests of the motherland.” Chinese law includes media regulations with vague terminologies authorities can use to claim that particular stories endanger the country by sharing state secrets. Journalists face harassment and prison terms for violating these rules and revealing classified matter. The government’s monitoring structure promotes an atmosphere of self-censorship; if published materials are deemed dangerous to state security after they appear in the media, the information can then be considered classified and journalists can be prosecuted.

Only state agencies can own media in China, but privatization is creeping in as outlets subcontract administrative operations to the private sector. The country’s burgeoning economy also is allowing greater diversity in China’s media coverage, and experts say the growing Chinese public’s demand for information is testing a regime that is trying to use media controls in its bid to maintain power. Natural disasters offer opportunities with which to test this so-called reclaimed freedom.

In this study, the Chinese press made the most use of the government action and response frame. Many stories, a number of them long and detailed, covered the behavior of government leaders—from President Hu Jintao to local officials. They were shown

comforting victims and overseeing rescue and evacuation operations. As the crisis evolved, the media paid close attention to reconstruction efforts initiated by all levels of government, including policies designed to help earthquake victims get back on their feet. Although a few stories did blame the government for poor building construction standards that caused the deaths of school children, positive coverage of the government's response was the most salient aspect in Chinese newspaper reports. Such reports offered assurances, which helped establish the public's faith in the government's ability to safeguard its citizens and maintain national stability.

In comparison, the American newspapers' coverage of the same disaster elicited highly affective frames; government frames barely played a complementary or secondary role. When government frames made the scene, it carried more dimensions, including the neglect of disaster warning signs, the viability of the national insurance system, the absence of safe building codes, and other factors attributable to the lack of government performance especially in protecting its constituents against naturally-occurring risks. Thus, the U.S. press can be said to be true to its role of being a government "watch dog" instead of a "guard dog."

The way the American newspapers made use of other frames is another example of how this role was portrayed. Several news stories criticized the Chinese government for collapsed school buildings and questioned China's propaganda system and its inability to offer any assurance at crisis times. It can be said, therefore, that the U.S.

papers are perpetually critical of government response, whether they are reporting about the Sichuan quakes or writing about Hurricane Katrina (Brunken, 2006).

Third, the findings suggest that when reporting natural disasters, journalists should be more flexible and willing to employ several story hooks in order to keep their audiences updated about unfolding events that often characterize a devastating crisis. For example, this study reveals the absence of the health frame in the Chinese articles, a topic that could have informed the public more about the measures taken to provide psychological care to earthquake victims. The neglect of this frame suggests that reporters should strengthen their working relationships with public health practitioners to apprise the public about this important aspect of recovery.

### **Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

The small sample size due to the short timeframe of analysis (three months) limited the generalization of this study's findings to other disaster situations. The complete enumeration sampling method produced less than 100 articles from two American newspapers, which may have curtailed the extent to which certain frames, such as the reconstruction frame, may have been detected.

The coding protocols precluded the analysis of images and other visual devices that often accompany text. These framing devices may have carried other frames not observed in this exclusively textual analysis.

The Sichuan earthquake is a domestic event to the Chinese media and an overseas disaster incident to the U.S. press. Thus, this study compared the coverage of a domestic

natural disaster with that of a natural disaster that happened abroad. Future studies could analyze both Chinese and American media coverage of a natural disaster incident in a third country, or examine two countries' media coverage of a domestic natural disaster. Such studies may provide a more concrete comparison of press performance in crisis events.

Future studies could analyze TV news coverage, which may provide more empirical evidence about press performance in reporting natural disasters. Although newspapers have the advantage of allowing for more in-depth investigative reports and follow-ups, TV news coverage outperforms newspaper coverage in terms of visual and auditory vividness. A suggested recommendation is to examine how TV networks covered the Sichuan earthquake and whether the same or similar framing patterns can be observed.

How a natural disaster in one country is covered by another country depends to some extent on the prevailing diplomatic ties and relationship between states. By virtue of its role as a strong trade partner, China, without a doubt, will continue to capture the American media agenda, and vice-versa. Future studies should test this hypothesis by examining the coverage of natural disasters in countries where the United States is neither liked nor supported. That is, a comparative analysis of disasters striking countries in which the U.S. has strong vs. weak diplomatic relations needs to be conducted. Such a study can also explore differences in frames and framing patterns.

Future efforts can also compare national and local newspapers in depicting a devastating natural calamity within one country. Because national and local newspapers have different ambits of circulation and readership, they may demonstrate different patterns of framing a single event, object, issue or personality.

Because of differences in journalistic routines and news organization expectations, future works can also investigate the performance of national and local media in terms of disaster reporting.

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## Appendix

## Sichuan Earthquake Coverage Codebook

Variable name	Variable label	Instructions and values	Code
ID	Article ID number		
PAPER	Newspaper that published the article	1= <i>People's Daily</i> 2= <i>West China City Daily</i> 3= <i>Washington Post</i> \ 4= <i>New York Times</i>	
DATE	Date of publication	Enter as mm-dd-yy	
LENGTH	Length of the article in number of words	Enter number of words	
FRAME1	First frame used in the article	1=government 2=mortality	
FRAME2	Second frame used in the article	3=damage 4=reconstruction	
FRAME3	Third frame used in the article	5=relief effort 6=health 7=survivor 8=other	
OTHER1	First "other frame" detected	Enter as a string variable. If none, enter "none."	
OTHER2	Second "other frame" detected	Enter as a string variable. If none, enter "none."	
OTHER3	Third "other frame" detected	Enter as a string variable. If none, enter "none."	