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One incident, two stories: News coverage of the Sino-US mid-air collision

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This study examined media bias in covering international conflicts through a comparison of *People's Daily* and *The New York Times's coverage* of the 2001 incident in which a US surveillance plane collided with a Chinese fighter off China's coast. Through a content analysis of 137 news reports and commentaries from *People's Daily* and 81 from *The New York Times* on the incident, this study shows that despite differences between the two newspapers in terms of their political and media environments and journalistic traditions, they were not significantly different in terms of journalistic bias in covering the incident. Both papers were echoing their own government's stand, and effectively facilitating the implementation of the diplomatic and political agenda of their own government.

Introduction

On April 1, 2001, a US plane on a surveillance mission collided with a Chinese fighter jet 104 kms off the coast of China's Hainan Province. The Chinese jet crashed into the sea while the US plane was damaged and landed on a military airport in Hainan, with its 24-member crew detained by the Chinese. The incident received wide coverage in both the US and Chinese media. A cursory examination of the coverage revealed wide disparity in the news coverage in terms of facts, angles and viewpoints presented. The disparity showed the fundamental differences between the two countries in their journalistic philosophy and practice. The Chinese media are state-controlled and act as tools of publicity for the Party-state. The US media are independent institutions exercising editorial autonomy and take an adversarial rather than supportive stand in covering the government.

Would media working in such contrasting media environments act differently in covering a major international dispute involving their own country? The answer would not only contribute to our knowledge of how media cover international conflicts but also allow us to compare a libertarian press with an authoritarian press to see if editorial freedom can really make a difference in covering international conflicts when one's own country is involved.

Media bias in covering international conflicts

News reporting is largely biased, especially when dealing with political news or other controversial social issues (Dennis & Merrill, 1996). Greater bias is more likely to be manifested in media's coverage of international conflicts when one's own country is involved. For example, report and photos showing brutal treatment of political prisoners by the South Koreans during the Korean War were withdrawn by the proprietor of *Picture Post*, who insisted that the report and photos would give aid and comfort to the enemy (Eldridge, 1993).

A comparison of the US media's coverage of the Korean Air flight KAL 007 shot down by a Soviet interceptor, and the Iran Air flight 655 shot down by a US navy ship showed that the former incident was framed as an action of moral outrage while the latter was described as a regrettable technological failure (Graber, 1993). In reporting the Gulf War, the US media focused on describing Saddam as a villain but overlooked the casualty of US bombing and cruelty of the US troops against the Iraqi soldiers (Hachten, 1996).

The War on Afghanistan launched by the United States without the United Nation's endorsement was carefully prepared long before the 9/11 attacks against the United States. The US media, however, covered up the real economic and strategic interests underlying the war in Afghanistan, and pretended that the war had emerged overnight, full-blown, in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Martin, 2001).

A similar analogy of media bias in international conflicts would be found in the NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999. A study on news framing of the incident (Parsons & Xu, 2001) found that there was an exchange of media attacks between the two countries and the newspapers examined adopted short-

term, issue-oriented frames of reference in line with their respective government's stand.

For international conflicts, the "us vs them" attitude tends to dominate news reports. Thompson (1997) used American football to explain media bias against one's opposing nation:

> It is easier to root with the home team at a football game, and boo at a referee's call against your team, than it is to maintain a point of reference that would be fair to the evidence… So often we get appeals to our loyalty – calls to be patriotic, to be a team player at work, to "be true to your school" (p.202)

An explanation of the paradox may lie in the 'standpoint theory', which assumes that the material, social and symbolic circumstances of a social group shape what its members experience, as well as how they think, act and feel (Wood, 1997). By the same token, news coverage of international affairs, particularly when a journalist's own country is involved, has always been marked by ethnocentrism and so-called "patriotism" (Altschull, 1979).

Another factor is the symbiotic relationship of the national media with the people of the country they operate in (Severin & Tankard, 1988). The media must give their consumers what they want, and usually people want to hear good things about themselves (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Although the goal of foreign policy of all nations is to promote national interest in the international arena, the strategies to promote such interests have changed. In the information age, a nation's status in the world community and its political ranking on the world stage are closely related to its media power (Ebo, 1997).

Nimmo (1978) noted that in terms of news coverage of foreign policies, the government influenced the media on not only how, but even whether, a story was written, especially when the media depended mainly on the government for news. Tiffen (1999) argued that media coverage of international affairs was often an extension of domestic political controversies and agendas, often in ways that allowed government interests and outlooks to dominate. Chang (1993) maintained that the media structurally served as an instrument in the actual implementation of the government's foreign policy.

Reflecting on their own role in covering the Gulf conflict, many American journalists believed that the news media had acted more like patriotic cheerleaders than detached, objective observers (Hackett, 1997). In any major conflicts with other countries, especially with the "evil" states as mentioned by Herman and Chomsky (1988), to justify and defend the government's action and stand, and to safeguard the interest of one's own country became much more important than adherence to the doctrine of "objectivity".

Chinese and US media

What makes the comparison of the Chinese and US media coverage of the incident particularly significant is that the two countries' media operate under entirely

different political and ideological frameworks, thus allowing us to see if media under fundamentally different press systems would differ in covering international conflicts.

The formation and development of China's contemporary media system paralleled the founding and growth of the Chinese Communist Party. The structure and organization of the Chinese media reflect the Party's principle of integrating the press with the Party structure (Yan, 2000).

China's reform since 1978 has gradually pushed the Chinese media to the market, forcing the media to serve the audience as well as the Party, although the Party still has the final say when politically sensitive issues become news. Diplomacy is one of the areas that the party is unwilling to subject to media criticism.

The journalistic characteristics of the American media began to take shape by the mid-1800s when the press began to gain rights of access to official information. The dominant media companies in the United States today are large profit-seeking corporations, owned and controlled by very wealthy boards and individuals (Stork & Flander, 1996).

The financial independence of the US media has not changed the fact that the media depend on the government for general policy support as well as information. As information from the government is generally portrayed as "accurate", the media tend to cite the government in order to maintain their image of being "objective" and also protect themselves from criticism of "bias" (Stork & Flander, 1996). The media routinely purvey news from the perspective of the government, especially in the case of foreign news. As Stork and Flander (1996) pointed out, when it comes to foreign matters, the media report what goes on in the world as what the White House says.

Despite the fact that government influence on the media exists in both China and the United States, such influence is more direct and beyond challenge in China whereas in the United States such influence is more subtle and challengeable. The Chinese media see the government as their boss but the US media tend to see the government as a potential enemy.

Method

To compare the news coverage of the Sino-US Air Collision, we chose to analyze the content of *People's Daily* from China and *The New York Times* from the United States, whose relational status to their respective governments signify ideological opposites (Parsons & Xu, 2001, p. 56). Although the two newspapers may not be representative of all the news media in the two countries, they are among the most influential mainstream newspapers in the two countries. *People Daily*, as an official voice of the Chinese Communist Party and state, plays an influential role in releasing and shaping news about major events and issues in China. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, is recognised as one of the most influential newspapers in the United States and a model of American journalism.

We focused on news reports of the incident over a 14-day period from April 2-15, 2001, starting from the breaking of the news about the incident to four days after the release of the US crew. *People's Daily*'s stories were obtained from the archive of its online edition. News stories of *The New York Times* were retrieved from the LexisNexis

database. Altogether, 218 stories were obtained for analysis, including 137 from *People's Daily* and 81 from *The New York Times*.

Textual comparisons were used to reveal the disparities between the news reports of the two newspapers and to look for biases. Specifically, we focused on the following aspects of the news coverage for comparison:

First, we compared the two newspapers' overall description of the incident by examining what facts they chose to present. By cross-checking, we were able to identify the missing parts in their coverage and ascertain their possible impact on readers' understanding of the incident.

Second, we examined how basic facts were interpreted. For example, was the reconnaissance carried out by the US plane hostile to China? Was the US plane's entry into China's space after the collision an invasion or a self-rescue attempt? Were the US crew held as hostages or treated with hospitality? Did the US government issue an apology or not in its letter to the Chinese government?

Third, we examined what kinds of sources were used for information and if the two newspapers made an effort to cite sources from the other side. When they quoted the other side, did they report the statements verbatim or paraphrased them according to their own interpretation?

Fourth, we examined the portrayal of the heroes in the stories, the Chinese pilots and the US aircraft crew. What kind of anecdotes and descriptors were used to portray them? What possible perception the readers may form of them after reading such portrayals?

Fifth, we compared the two newspapers on their conclusions about the incident. Who was at fault? Who won from the confrontation? What would the incident signify for the future Sino-US relations? In addition, we examined the linguistic differences between the two newspapers in their coverage of the incident by comparing the various terms they used and their possible impact on readers' interpretation of the incident.

Findings[1]

The Incident

People's Daily, whose reports were mainly based on the Chinese government's statements, claimed that the United States was the aggressor and therefore was to blame for the incident. According to *People's Daily*, the US plane was flying near China's coastline and two Chinese F-8 fighters were following normal practice to monitor such activities when the much larger US plane veered suddenly at a wide angle and struck one of the Chinese planes, causing it to break up and crash into the sea. The US plane then entered China's airspace and landed without permission at a military airfield in Hainan Island.

The paper denounced the United States for provoking the encounter, for ramming the much smaller Chinese fighter, and for violating Chinese airspace after the collision. It reported that the US surveillance flights took place within a 320-kilometer "exclusive

economic control zone", over which foreign planes must fly with consideration of the rights of the country involved. The paper said the United States also violated the consensus reached by the two countries, which set out guidelines for avoiding risky encounters in sea areas. The US plane is a military plane whose flight path and spy missions were seen as threats to China's national security and violation of international laws, and therefore it was within China's rights to closely monitor the spy plane's activities.

The New York Times gave an entirely different picture of the incident. In reporting the US government's position, the paper rejected the Chinese claims and accused the Chinese pilots of routinely flying dangerously close to US planes in the area. It also disputed the Chinese claim of the threats posed by the US spy plane over its "exclusive economic zone", arguing that the plane was rightfully operating over international waters.

By citing US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, *The New York Times* accused the Chinese pilot of swooping his fighter plane close by the US plane twice before clipping its leftmost propeller on a third pass and then hitting the inner engine of the bigger plane and flipping up into the nose of the US plane. The collision broke the smaller jet apart, sending it into the sea, and badly damaged the American aircraft, forcing it to make an emergency landing on the Chinese soil. Before the landing, the US crew signaled distress calls but its permission to land was denied by the Chinese side. The US plane had to circle the airfield to demonstrate the extent of its damage before landing at the Chinese airport.

The only hard evidence shown by the two papers was three photos of the damaged US plane supplied by the Chinese government, but the interpretations of the photos were quite different. *People's Daily* saw the photos as evidence that the US plane knocked down the Chinese jet but *The New York Times* concluded that it was a miracle for the brave US crew to manage to land the damaged plane safely.

The differences could be partly attributed to the different sources used. While *The New York Times* mostly quoted US government officials and American experts, *People's Daily* almost invariably cited the Chinese government spokespersons and pro-China sources. For example, the first *People Daily* report on the incident contained almost nothing but quotes from the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, making no effort to cite US responses.

The New York Times, however, quoted many more sources, including the same Chinese spokesman quoted by *People's Daily.* But the quoting of the Chinese spokesman's remark that "the US side has total responsibility for this event" was not done until the US side's story was told. The Chinese spokesman's statement, quoted out of context, made the Chinese government appear a bit unreasonable and incredible.

Chinese spokesman's statement that the US plane had "entered Chinese airspace" "without permission and landed on a Chinese airfield" was immediately questioned by the statement that "it was unclear if Mr Zhu was suggesting that the plane was in Chinese airspace at the time of the collision or merely that it had entered Chinese airspace 'without permission' in order to make its emergency landing".

The Heroes

A news story cannot do without its characters, but the same characters can be portrayed differently. One of the key characters in the story was the missing Chinese pilot, Wang Hai, who was portrayed by *People's Daily* as a hero, whose fate immediately became a concern for Chinese President Jiang Zemin as well as the entire Chinese nation.

Wang was depicted as a loving and caring father, husband and son. He was portrayed as a versatile person who was good at furniture designing, painting, singing, playing the guitar and computer in addition to being a good officer and pilot. He was described as a smart, capable, active and responsible person with an outgoing character, who "is not only a good son of his parents, but also a good son of the people of the whole nation".

The New York Times, however, drew a totally different picture of the same Chinese pilot, who was described as a reckless, playful and mischievous character who liked to show off with dangerous moves in the air. In a April 6 story, *The New York Times* reported that the Chinese pilot had flown so close to American aircraft one month before the incident that he was photographed holding a piece of white paper with his email address written on it. He was described as "being flashy and wanted to show off his stuff", and "was trying to impress or intimidate the American crew, or both."

The American crew of the reconnaissance plane, on the other hand, was described as intruders by *People's Daily* but devoted military servicemen by *The New York Times*. *People's Daily* insisted that the American crew was held for "investigation" of the incident, but *The New York Times* claimed that the American crew was detained by China for diplomatic gains.

People's Daily quoted the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman to say that "the Chinese government has the full right to investigate the incident" and arrangements had been made for the American crew "in accordance with the international norms and in the spirit of humanitarianism". It explained that China "has the right to seek compensation from the United States for damages caused by the 'mistakes' of its pilots". *People's Daily* quoted the US defense attaché in Beijing to show how the crew members were "taken good care of" and in good health and high spirit. The crew members were quoted as saying that they were "very much satisfied with the e-mails and daily necessities provided for them by the Chinese side".

Despite that *The New York Times* said it would not use the term "hostage" to refer to the crew in line with the US government's positioning of the issue, it had its own way of playing with the term "hostage" satirically and sarcastically. In an April 6 story, the reporter quoted an article in a conservative magazine, which said that "the crew members are hostages and that President Bush has shown 'weakness' in his approach". In another article on April 9, *The New York Times* described the crew as "not only hostages to politics, but also hostages to language". These assertions were supported with opinion poll results, which "found that a majority of people consider the military detainees to be hostages."

Apology or no apology

After 11 days of negotiation in which the Chinese side demanded an apology from the United States as a pre-condition for resolving the issue, US Ambassador to China, Joseph Pruepher, passed a letter to the Chinese government, saying that President

George W. Bush and Secretary of State Collin Powell sincerely regretted and were very sorry for what had happened.

The US letter was crafted in such a way that it said the most "sincere" words but avoided assuming any responsibility. At the lexical level, it avoided using the word "apologise". Instead, it expressed "sincere regret" over the "missing pilot and aircraft"; and felt "very sorry" for the loss to the Chinese pilot's family and "very sorry" that "the entering of China's airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance".

People's Daily did not carry the full text of the letter and chose to carry a news report which labeled the letter as a "*zhi qian xin*" (letter of apology) in its lead. The report then went on to quote the letter with considerable controversy in the translation. The most controversial part of the translation lies in the rendering of the phrase "very sorry" into *shen biao qian yi* (expressing profound apology). Although *qian yi* is lesser in degree than the phrase *dao qian* which the Chinese government had demanded, it also assumes a certain extent of responsibility on part of the person who expresses *qian yi*. An examination of the original text shows that "very sorry" may be closer in meaning to the expression *shen biao wan xi* (feel very regretful) in the Chinese translation done by the US Embassy. The crucial difference in the two versions is that *wan xi* means "feel sorrow", "grief over", or "mourn" rather than "feel apologetic", which *qian yi* denotes.

While the word "regret" and its direct translation *yi han* may have different connotations, the alteration of the object "missing pilot and aircraft" to "the missing of China's pilot and crash of the aircraft", changed the original meaning. While the original letter expressed regrets over the pilot and aircraft, the regret expressed in the Chinese version was over two actions, leaving more space for the Chinese reader to interpret.

Apart from these alterations in the denotation and connotation of the linguistic components, there was a significant omission in *People's Daily*'s story on the letter in the part immediately preceding the two "sorries" which read, "Although the full picture of what transpired is still unclear, according to our information, our severely crippled aircraft made an emergency landing after following international emergency procedures." This part seems to provide some context to the understanding of the two "sorries" that followed, showing clearly the US reservation on what really happened.

In this way, the letter was conveniently described by the Chinese paper as the official US apology to the Chinese government and people, and hence the ending of the deadlock was a "victory" for the Chinese. Naturally, the US side did not read the letter as in any sense apologizing for what it had done. Therefore, *The New York Times* said that in the letter, "the Bush administration rightly resisted Chinese demands for concessions…including Beijing's untenable condition that Washington apologize and accept responsibility". The letter, therefore, represented the success of "Mr Bush's strategy of non-apology and limited negotiation" to Beijing.

Who won?

The US crew was finally released after the US government sent the "sorry" letter to the Chinese government. The Chinese paper immediately claimed a Chinese victory in resolving the issue, while the American paper maintained that the US did not

lose the battle. The contradictory claims of victory were partly due to the different interpretations of the letter.

In its April 11 commentary "Turn Patriotic Enthusiasm into Strength to Build a Powerful Nation", *People's Daily* declared that "China has won initial success in its struggle" and "forced the US government to change from its initial rude and unreasonable attitude to extending an apology to the Chinese people". It concluded that "we Chinese believe in the irresistible historic trend that justice and truth will win".

On April 13, another commentary titled "Hegemony: A Mantis Trying to Stop a Chariot" claimed Chinese victory again and asserted that "the Chinese and world people have been waiting for this victory for too long" as "the American government only started to retreat from their initial arrogant, unreasonable attitude as a result of the strong condemnation from the Chinese people and the strong pressure of the world public opinion, including the public opinion of the American people".

In an April 12 story, *The New York Times* emphasized that in the US letter to Beijing, "Washington accepted no responsibility for the mid-air collision." In the same day's editorial titled "Ending the Spy Plane Deadlock", it was stated, "To its credit, the Bush administration achieved a diplomatic solution without yielding to Beijing's unreasonable insistence that it accepts blame for the American plane's collision with a Chinese jet fighter. It also refuses to promise an end to American reconnaissance flights over international waters near China." It praised the US government for its way of handling the issue by saying that the administration performed well and "it managed the episode in a restrained and measured way" and "rightly resisted Chinese demands for concessions on more central issues".

The paper complimented Bush on his "cool" and "conciliatory" approach as he needed to "tamp down some of the administration's hawks and many uniformed commanders" while trying to "settle on a suitable compromise" with China. It was also reported that Bush tactfully called leaders of Britain, France, Brazil and Canada to encourage them to quietly press Chinese leaders. Finally, although with the "leverage" in the hands of the Chinese, Washington managed to secure the release of the crew without any major compromise.

Linguistic differences

Media biases are often manifested through the use of vocabulary with special connotation and denotation, as well as sentence structures and discourse of text, etc. The following table presents some of the linguistic differences between the two newspapers in covering the incident.

Table 1. Linguistic Differences between the Two Newspapers

Events and Issues	*People's Daily*	*The New York Times*
The American reconnaissance mission on China	Spy flights; spy mission; haunt (China's coastal area); encroach upon (Chinese airspace); eavesdropping; espionage mission; hostile military action; spy operations; wrong spy activities; suspicious flights	Routine surveillance mission; regular flights; patrol the high seas; monitor
The location where the collision took place	China's airspace; coastal areas of China; exclusive economic zone; offshore waters; China's water areas	Over international waters; international airspace; well outside of Chinese territory
American plane's entry into China's airspace after the collision	Wantonly intruded into China's airspace; entered China illegally; arbitrarily intruded into	Entered Chinese airspace; a miraculous job of piloting (to land the damaged plane on Chinese airport).
The nature of the air collision	By no means accidental; not isolated case	Accident, incidental
China's accusation that US should bear responsibility	Lodged a solemn representation; protest; made a serious representation	Blamed; faults (US for the collision); buttress; furious denunciation; obfuscated; accusatory; caustic; threaten; foolish demand; needlessly confrontational
The damaged US plane	Culprit aircraft; warplane entered China illegally	An aircraft in distress; sovereign extension of US authority; sovereign territory
Whether China is entitled to examine the US plane	Has every right to investigate the plane; it (US plane) cannot enjoy immunity	The Chinese are playing with fire; enjoys sovereign immune status; precludes foreign official from searching, inspecting; a severe breach in diplomatic protocol (if China boards it)
Examination of the US plane	Investigate; technical inspection	Impounded; tempering with
China's stand toward the issue	Solemn and just stance; justifiable, rational request; fully justified	Frosty position; rigidity; hard-line attitude; unreasonable; playing by its own rule
US demand of the release of the crew	Arrogance; haughtiness; gangster logic	Admonishing; warning, run out of patience
The US spy plane crew	Intruders	Pawns in this dispute; hostages; prisoners; captors; detainees; heroes
Chinese treatment of the US crew	In humanitarian spirit; made proper arrangement; in accordance with international norms; well taken care of	Held incommunicado; confine the crew; no individual meeting were permitted; hold prisoner… to extract our apology; unwanted guests

US argument on the incident	Lame arguments; called black white; make groundless accusations; confuse right and wrong; erroneous calculation; impervious to reason; How unreasonable!	Acquitted itself (the US government) well; clear and reasonable; moderate in their language; right to register a strong protest; "that claim is correct"
US "sorry" letter to China	A formal apology; bow and apology; a letter of apology (zi qian xin)	A non-apology; a deal; compromise language; amplified language; Washington accepted no responsibility; a suitable compromise; use of linguistic ambiguity; "a diplomatic note nuanced enough to be satisfactory to both sides"
The Chinese pilot	Hero; martyr; passionate person; good student; extremely responsible; pride of the whole nation; hard-working pilot; deserves the highest glory; brave pilot; good son; pride of the people	Flashy; show-off; hot-dogger; reckless; aggressive; "was intent on harassing our air crews"; unsafe airmanship; squirrelly

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings show that although *People's Daily* and *The New York Times* operate in different political and media environments with different journalistic traditions and orientations, they were not significantly different in expressing journalistic bias in covering the incident. Both papers were echoing their own government's stand, and effectively facilitating the implementation of the diplomatic and political agenda of their own government. In the process, journalists became loyal, passionate citizens instead of objective observers in rallying support for their government and demonstrating "patriotism" for their nation.

Neither paper made real efforts to cover the other side's views and stand. Neither paper tried to balance the points of view of the two governments. What "our" government said was always taken for granted, while the "facts" and opinion of "their" government were "toned", either by one-sided explanations in *The New York Times* or by direct criticism in *People's Daily.*

Bias of the two newspapers ranges from the micro-level linguistic presentation to the macro-level assessment of the incident. Both papers presented the news from their own angle and incorporated the threads of news developments and details of the event into their own interpretive framework. Voices of dissent or the other country's views were downplayed or presented with "lenses" that could distort readers' perception of these "facts" and arguments. Overall, issues that the government needed to focus on and draw the public's attention to were prominently displayed.

While both newspapers were found to be biased, they differed in specific techniques of narration and overall packaging of the news, as well as the underlying political, social and cultural values and ideologies that were promoted. Compared to their Chinese

counterparts, *The New York Times* reporters were more elaborate in their stories, and made greater efforts to interpret the situation by incorporating more sources, but they packaged their stories in such ways that they were in line with their own understanding of the situation. On the other hand, *People's Daily* seldom used more than one source in a story and blended different opinions in a commentary. There were very few, if any, voices challenging China's official version of the incident and the ensuing events and issues. Even when the other side's views were cited, they meant only for condemnation, criticism or ridicule.

It would be unfair to the journalists if we believe both newspapers set out to support their own government in total disregard of the nature of the incident itself. The support of their government's stand on the issue might reflect more of the public sentiment of the two nations than the journalists' blind faith in their own government. Despite public criticism of domestic policies in both countries, the public tends to rally around the flag when it comes to international conflicts, especially when the cause and evolution of the conflict are beyond the public's direct scrutiny.

Despite the overall similarity of the two papers in supporting their own government and public stand on the issue, they differed in the ways their support was conveyed. *The New York Times* seemed to lay more emphasis on justifying their government's view and action, while *People's Daily* simply acted as a conveyor of the government's views and stand.

The differences in bias also reflected the enduring values and beliefs of the two nations. The controlling mechanism and religion of "anticommunism" of the US media helped to set the tone of the coverage, fix the premises of the discourse and decide what is newsworthy. In the Chinese newspaper, on the other hand, phrases like "anti-imperialism" and "anti-hegemony", which had lost their meanings since the end of China's Cultural Revolution, resurfaced for the purpose of propaganda.

To a certain degree, the mid-air collision resulted in a confrontation between the enduring American and Chinese values and ideologies. The Chinese might never get the true meaning of Americans tying yellow ribbons around the air base to welcome back their heroes, and neither would the Americans understand exactly what an "apology" means to the Chinese, in whose culture the value of "face" is more important than losing an arm or a leg, or in this instance an aircraft and its pilot.

In the final analysis, the question of media bias boils down to the problem of instinctive bias of human beings. After all, news reports are not reflections of the "reality" itself, but what journalists, their news organization and their readers see as "reality". This is especially true in reporting events and issues in which national "honor" and "pride" are at stake.

For *People's Daily*, despite obvious manipulation by the government, most of its reports and commentaries condemning the US hegemony are largely spontaneous and voluntary expressions of the journalists and the Chinese public. Its coverage of the mid-air collision could not be simply dismissed as government propaganda under the party control. There was something more inherent and inevitable on the part of its journalists who wrote about the incident as such.

On the other hand, journalists of *The New York Times* failed to produce the kind of diversity of information and views expected of a free press. Voices considered

potentially harmful to the American interest and the credibility of the US government were filtered out or marginalized. As far as media bias disguised as "patriotism" is concerned, the American journalists did not fare much better than the Chinese journalists despite their belief in objectivity and fairness as supreme values for a truly free and responsible press.

The bias in the reporting of international news reflects more of the collective bias of a nation than the prejudice of individual journalists. As Anderson (1983) noted, the unification or consensus of the people in the modern nations is not achieved by military means, but by cultural means, especially through the national media, which enable a nation to imagine itself as a coherent, meaningful and homogeneous community.

When the news coverage of an international conflict is dominated by the "Us vs. Them" mentality, no media can be free of bias whether they are "free" or "controlled". Media in such instances effectively become passionate cheerleaders for the home team. The government, which helps to put in place a political and nationalistic consensus for the media, sets the overall tone for the media war. In the long run, media bias in international affairs are bound to be destructive and detrimental to the world peace as it promotes misunderstanding, distrust and animosity between peoples and nations.

Implications for journalism education

One important lesson we should draw from this incident is that freedom from government intervention alone does not guarantee independent judgment by journalists and bias-free reporting of the news. Journalism educators must highlight to their students the pressure from the national ideology, public opinion and journalists' own side-taking in covering controversial issues and social conflicts.

Objectivity and fairness in covering international conflicts are more difficult to achieve than in covering other events and issues that involve side taking by the public such as international competition in sports, which is always affected by the home crowd mentality. Unlike competitions in sports, in which fairness has to be guided by agreed rules, international conflicts are more likely to be perceived and judged according to one's own national stand. Journalists face much greater pressure to cheer for the home team and rally around the flag under such circumstances.

Journalism students must be aware that objectivity and fairness are often the most difficult to achieve in covering international conflicts, especially those arising out of historical, cultural, ideological, political and economic confrontations. More importantly, biased reporting of international conflicts, which misleads decision makers and the public, aggravates such conflicts.

On a practical level, it is important for journalism students to learn to get all the facts, especially facts that cannot be provided by our own government and parties directly involved in the conflict. Only by piecing these facts together can journalists and the public form a more holistic view of the situation and make correct interpretation of it. In classroom teaching, instructors need to use different scenarios to help students learn how to piece together various facts, and identify and search for the missing facts.

When there is conflicting information about facts, which is most likely to happen in the context of international conflicts, cross-checking and further investigation are always required. When conflicting information cannot be verified, journalists should present stories from both sides and highlight their differences, in order to not only help the audience make a better judgment but also to put on record the differences for future verification.

What is more important than presenting conflicting facts and views is that journalists must make a genuine effort to understand how the other side's perception and interpretation of the same facts were derived. Such an understanding may not necessarily change the views of journalists or their own national sentiment, but it helps journalists ensure their own views are based on rational ground and to report the other side's views more accurately and fairly.

The fundamental values and principles involved in reporting international conflicts are no different from what we try to instil in journalism students everyday, namely truth-telling, objectivity and fairness. What makes reporting international conflicts particularly difficult is that journalists are facing a home crowd expecting them to cheer on the home team, thus providing a real test for journalists on their integrity and social responsibility.

Notes

[1] Due to the huge number of rather short statements, phrases and words cited in this section, it is impossible to provide in-text references for everything cited here. All the findings presented here are based on news reports published by the two newspapers during this 14-days period.

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