

Evaluating Attitudes in Crisis: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of Covid-19 News Coverage

Doaa Talaat

Teaching Assistant, Zagazig University

doaatalaat5@gmail.com

Dr\ Amany El-Shazly

Professor of Linguistics, Helwan University

amanyelshazly@arts.helwan.edu.eg

Dr\ Fatma Ismail

Assistant Professor of Linguistics Helwan University

fatma_ismail@arts.helwan.edu.eg

Abstract

The present study examines how Western news sites used evaluative language in their coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic and its related issues. By utilizing the language of evaluation, news writers have managed to shape the public's emotions and ideologies. The study adopted an eclectic methodological approach, combining corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Attitude, a sub-system of the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). The dataset comprises 4,662,477 words, which were collected from different Western news sites between January 2020 and December 2022. The data were divided into two corpora: mainstream news corpus (M. Corpus) and fake news corpus (F. Corpus), in order to compare how mainstream news outlets and fake news outlets used evaluative language to frame the pandemic. The mainstream news corpus, comprising 3,267,271, was compiled from the following mainstream news sites: *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*. The fake news corpus, comprising 1,395,206, was compiled from *Expose News*, *Clash Daily*, and *Before its News*. The analysis revealed significant differences in the use of evaluative language between the two corpora, suggesting that the language of the pandemic news coverage was systematically shaped by the ideological positioning of mainstream and fake news media.

Keywords:

Covid-19, Appraisal Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, corpus linguistics, ideology, mainstream news, fake news

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic originated in Wuhan, China and spread rapidly to countries across the globe in just a few months. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency. This declaration increased public anxiety as the virus continued to spread at an alarming rate. On March 11, 2020, the WHO classified Covid-19 as a “global pandemic”. This again intensified public fear and anxiety. This led media outlets worldwide to dedicate most of their coverage to the global persistent crisis.

This study explores how mainstream vs. fake news platforms used evaluative language to frame information about the pandemic and guide public perception. The study adopts an eclectic Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis approach, incorporating the Attitude subsystem of the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) and corpus linguistics to compare evaluative language use in both media types. Based on previous research on media discourse and ideological positioning (e.g., Benkler, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), the study advances the following hypotheses: (1) mainstream news sources will emphasize fear, risk, and social responsibility, supporting public trust in covid-19 pandemic science-based policies; (2) fake news sources will emphasize suspicion, conspiracy, distrust, and moral condemnation of authorities and public health policies.

2. Theoretical and analytical frameworks

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

van Dijk (2001) defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). For Fairclough (1995a), CDA emphasizes that the use of language is ideologically driven; the choice of certain linguistic features conveys underlying ideologies, resulting from

distinct social contexts communicative purposes. By these means, every language works as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995a). Accordingly, CDA scholars analyze how the choice of words, sentences and discourse structures is not arbitrary; rather it is influenced by people's positioning in the broader social and political contexts.

Many scholars have pointed out the importance of studying the language of media discourse (Fairclough, 1995b; Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007). According to Richardson (2007), there is a growing interest in studying media discourse since it reflects how certain ideologies are normalized and how social reality is shaped. For van Dijk (2006), ideologies can be understood as widely accepted beliefs or viewpoints shared by members of a community.

It follows that representing social events, issues and crises in the media does not necessarily mirror reality. Instead, it is a process of sorting, filtering and finally producing ideologically laden reporting of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In the same regard, Fowler (1991, p. 19) maintains that reporting news entails presenting it within "a certain light of representation, and so selection involves an ideological act of interpretation". Thus, Beard (2000) argues that "there is no such thing as unbiased report, no such thing as neutral language" (p. 18). Hence, individuals' point of views which positively or negatively represent realities are considered biased representations, according to Qayyum et al. (2018).

In news discourse, bias can be enacted in various ways. These include the selective reporting of certain stories over others, the inclusion of certain voices while excluding alternative perspectives, and the strategic emphasis on the credibility of some sources while casting doubt on others. Additionally, bias may be conveyed by using positively or negatively charged lexical choices when referring to specific groups or topics, as well as through the visual prominence of articles, such as their placement and the space allocated to them within the publication (Hamborg et al., 2018).

2.1.1 Ideology

Central to CDA is the concept of ideology, which refers to the underlying beliefs and practices that shape social reality (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In this study, examining ideology is particularly relevant, as this helps explain how the media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic may have influenced public opinions about the crisis. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) define ideologies as “particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power” (p. 275). These ideologies often operate as “common-sense assumptions”, embedded within the individuals’ linguistic choices in social interaction, viz. assumptions that are typically implicit and may go unnoticed (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2).

Similarly, Wodak and Meyer (2009) describe ideology as “an (often) one-sided perspective or worldview composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations, which are shared by members of a specific social group” (p. 88). Van Dijk (1998) further emphasizes that ideologies are expressed through “symbols, rituals, discourse, and other social and cultural practices” (p. 26). Thus, investigating ideology within media discourse allows for a deeper understanding of how the news writers' use of language can reinforce or challenge dominant narratives during public health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, Wodak (2001) views ideologies as belief systems by which societies are constructed and represented in specific ways, often resulting in the reinforcement of unequal power relations, domination, and exploitation. Thus, the concept of power is central to ideology. In this respect, Wodak and Meyer (2009) identify four key characteristics of ideology: “(i) power takes precedence over individual cognition; (ii) both power and cognition influence individuals’ evaluative judgments; (iii) ideologies serve as guides for behavior and action; and (iv) they are expected to maintain internal logical coherence” (p. 8). These features emphasize how ideologies not only shape social structures but also influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to social realities.

2.1.2 Manipulation

Fowler (1991) suggests that language is a tool used by those in power to maintain social inequality and perpetuate discrimination. That is, powerful people use language as an instrument to produce asymmetrical power relationships, in social and political contexts. In this regard, van Dijk (1993) claims that people who experience inequality and discrimination usually tend to resist this power abuse (dominance), which is usually practiced by key political figures. Nevertheless, this dominance discourse/power abuse is implicitly reproduced in media discourse. According to Van Dijk (2006), this implicit representation of dominance discourse/power can be seen as manipulation, or as propaganda (Richardson, 2007; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). It follows that manipulation can be ideologically motivated; positively representing *us* and negatively representing *them* (Van Dijk, 2006). In the context of this study, the powerful groups are primarily government and public health authorities (e.g., U.S. presidents, medical experts such as Dr. Fauci, and institutions like the CDC and WHO), who are framed in sharply contrasting ways across the two corpora—legitimized and trusted in mainstream reporting, but delegitimized and accused of power abuse in fake news discourse.

In fact, manipulation is different from persuasion; manipulation is illegitimate as it is enacted in discourse to mislead the readers to achieve the writers' aims. Persuasion, however, seeks to establish an agreement between the reader and the writer by directly presenting the aim of the writer (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). De Saussure (2005) explains that manipulation can be enacted through various linguistic and discursive practices, such as the use of inaccurate analogies and sweeping generalizations. He also emphasizes the role of socio-cognitive strategies, particularly the influence of collective group dynamics, where followers are pressured to align with the appraisals of their leaders, which is commonly referred to as group pressure.

Similarly, Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) argue that manipulation can take multiple forms, including the use of misleading language intended to deceive readers or the deliberate omission of information that may hinder the manipulator's objectives. These strategies emphasize how language can be systematically employed to shape perception and control interpretation in news discourse.

2.2. The language of news reporting

The language of news reporting is produced to be informative, credible, and to be accessible to a wide range of audience (Bell, 1991). For Lukin (2013) the language of news reporting can be used not only to inform the public, but also to shape the public's perception by intentionally using certain linguistic strategies, such as specific lexical choices and narrative framing. In this regard, Fowler (1991) argues that the linguistic choices in newspapers are not neutral, rather they are shaped by ideological manifestations that influence how news is presented and understood. Thus, the language of news reporting is considered a powerful tool for both informing the public and indirectly influencing the public's attitudes towards social, economic and political events and crises.

The focus of the present study is to explore how different ideological orientations influence the use of evaluative language of the coverage in the Covid-19 pandemic by both mainstream news platforms and fake news platform. According to Lazer et al. (2018), mainstream media "refer to news organizations that adhere to widely accepted journalistic norms and standards, and which are generally trusted by the public and peer institutions" (p. 1094). Examples include *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *Reuters*, and *The Guardian*. Thus, mainstream news sources are often characterized by their editorial independence, structured reporting processes, and ethical obligations to accuracy and objectivity (Lazer et al., 2018).

Fake news, by contrast, refers to deliberately fabricated information that is presented in the form of true or accurate news reporting. Such fake news usually lacks verifiable facts and journalistic conventions of objectivity and accuracy. As Allcott

and Gentzkow (2017) define it, fake news consists of “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and that could mislead readers” (p. 213). These sources often present conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, or partisan distortions, typically without editorial checks. They may operate outside established media norms and are frequently shared via social media platforms or fringe websites (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al. 2018).

Furthermore, Benkler et al. (2018) show how **mainstream media** often adhere to norms of professional journalism and reinforce **elite-driven discourse**, while fake news outlets frequently exploit populist ideologies and anti-establishment attitudes by fostering political polarization and manipulating emotional responses. In this respect, Waisbord (2018) argues that **fake news aligns with populist rhetoric**, which frames mainstream journalism as part of a corrupt elite and positions alternative sources as the voice of the “people.” This narrative makes fake news more appealing to audiences who are skeptical of official authorities or institutions.

2.3 Appraisal Theory

Appraisal Theory is centered on three main systems which can be applied to texts to analyze evaluative language. The Appraisal Theory comprises three main systems: **Attitude**, **Engagement**, and **Graduation**. *Attitude* concerns the expression of feelings and emotions; *Engagement* focuses on how language attributes or sources opinions; and *Graduation* relates to the intensity or amplification of evaluative language (Martin & White, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the analysis focuses exclusively on the **Attitude** subsystem, as it aligns with the study’s core themes: the pandemic itself, protection policies, and representations of key figures.

2.3.1 Attitude

The Attitude system, according to Painter (2003), is “a domain concerned with the linguistic expression of positive and negative attitudes” (p. 184). It can be described as “our feelings,

including emotional reactions, judgements of behavior and evaluation of things” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35). It comprises three sub-systems: *Affect*, *Judgment*, and *Appreciation* (Martin & White, 2005). *Affect* refers to the expression of emotional responses and personal feelings. For instance, phrases such as “weary doctors and nurses voiced frustration” reflect the emotional toll of the pandemic. *Judgment* involves the evaluation of people’s behavior according to social norms, as seen in expressions like “NHS staff became the pride of the nation,” which signal admiration and moral approval. Finally, *Appreciation* pertains to the evaluation of phenomena, entities, or processes, such as in the phrase “lockdown is a necessary evil,” where the policy is assessed in terms of its perceived value or impact.

2.3.1.1 Affect

The Affect sub-system is divided into four sub-branches. These sub-branches are: (Un) Happiness, (In) Security, (Dis) Satisfaction, and (Un) Desirability. Martin and White (2005, P. 49) described Affect as grouping “emotions into three major sets having to do with Un/ Happiness, In/ Satisfaction and DIS/ Satisfaction”.

In relation to a trigger, the Un/ Happiness sub-branch has to do with feeling happy or sad. This sub-branch includes most of the feelings which “are probably the first to come to mind when we think of emotions” (Martin & White 2005, P. 49). Feelings of peace and anxiety are related to the (In)Security sub-branch, whereas the sub-branch of Dis/Satisfaction “deals with our feelings of achievement and frustration in relation to the activities in which we are engaged, including our roles as both participants and spectators” (Martin & White 2005, P. 50).

2.3.1.2 Judgement

Judgment is concerned with the evaluation of human behavior, particularly how it aligns with socially shared norms and expectations. In other words, it reflects writers’ attitudes toward

others and how individuals are assessed in terms of their actions and behavior. Within Appraisal Theory, *Judgment* is divided into two key subtypes: *Judgment of Esteem* and *Judgment of Sanction* (Martin & White, 2005).

Judgment of Esteem pertains to a person's personal traits, abilities, and reliability. It is realized through:

- **Normality** – evaluating how typical or exceptional a person is (e.g., *She is nice / nasty*);
- **Capacity** – assessing someone's competence or skill (e.g., *She is clever / stupid*);
- **Tenacity** – reflecting how dependable or determined a person is (e.g., *She is careful / careless*). (Martin & White, 2005)

In contrast, *Judgment of Sanction* relates to a person's morality and adherence to ethical standards. It includes:

- **Veracity** – evaluating how honest or deceptive someone is (e.g., *She is honest / dishonest*);
- **Propriety** – assessing how ethically someone behaves (e.g., *She is kind / mean*). (Martin & White, 2005)

2.3.1.3 Appreciation

Evaluating objects, unlike Judgement, is the focus of the sub-system of Appreciation. According to Martin and White (2005), Appreciation has to do with the assessment of the appearance, composition, and significance of objects in relation to aesthetics and other systems of social value. Appreciation is realized through either adjective phrases or nominal phrases. In this regard, Martin and White (2005, P. 56) explain that Appreciation is concerned with “meanings construing our evaluations of "things" especially things we make”. For example, in the current study this is evident in the representation of protection policies (lockdown and face masking policies, for example). Appreciation is classified into *reaction, composition, and valuation*. Each of these categories has

sub-categories, according to which utterances can be evaluated. These three categories are related to Halliday's transitivity mental processes of affection, perception and cognition (Martin & White, 2005).

3. Corpus Compilation and Analytical Procedures

For this study, a corpus of 4,662,477 words was compiled and analyzed using *AntConc* software (Version 4.2.4; Anthony, 2023). The data were collected to investigate how different Western news sites framed the COVID-19 pandemic through evaluative language. News articles and reports were identified using the keywords "Coronavirus" and "COVID-19," covering the period from January 2020 to December 2022. The sources included six Western media outlets: *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, *USA Today* (mainstream media), and *Before It's News*, *Clash Daily*, and *Expose News* (alternative media).

3.1 Data Selection Criteria

The data selection process was guided by three main criteria:

- **Diversity:** Articles were selected from both UK- and US-based outlets to represent the Western media landscape.
- **Relevance:** Only articles directly addressing COVID-19 topics were included.
- **Accessibility:** Articles had to be available through public or digital archives.

News articles were manually collected from both mainstream sources (e.g., <https://www.nytimes.com/international>, <https://www.independent.co.uk>, <https://www.usatoday.com>) and alternative media, i.e. fake news platforms (e.g., <https://beforeitsnews.com>, <https://clashdaily.com>, <https://expose-news.com>). Each article was checked for relevance and converted into plain text files (txt). Non-linguistic elements such as

timestamps, navigation bars, and HTML tags were removed to ensure a clean dataset for processing in *AntConc*.

3.2 Corpus Compilation and Classification

Based on content and fact-checking classifications (International Fact-Checking Network, 2023), the full corpus was divided into two sub-corpora:

- **Mainstream News Corpus (M. Corpus):** 3,267,271 words
- **Alternative Media News Corpus (A. Corpus):** 1,395,206 words

The mainstream corpus was extracted from LexisNexis and consisted of articles from *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, and *USA Today*. The alternative (i.e. fake news) corpus included manually collected texts from *Before It's News*, *Clash Daily*, and *Expose News*.

The mainstream news corpus is approximately twice the size of the fake news corpus. This reflects the relative abundance of mainstream Covid-19 coverage compared to fake news items, which were more limited in availability and often removed from circulation. Since all frequencies were normalized (Baker, 2006; Mautner, 2009; McEnery & Hardie, 2012), the difference in corpus size does not bias the results, and the larger mainstream corpus contributes to representativeness and statistical stability while the fake news corpus remains sufficient for meaningful comparison.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis combined **Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** with **Appraisal Theory** (Martin & White, 2005), with the focus on the *Attitude* subsystem of Appraisal Theory—*Affect*, *Judgment*, and *Appreciation*.

3.4 Corpus Analysis Procedures

- **Corpus Preparation:** All documents were standardized and stored in a folder. Texts were cleaned of formatting and metadata.
- **Loading into AntConc:** The folder was opened in *AntConc*, which indexed the corpus and made it ready for analysis.
- **Word Frequency:** The *Word List* tool was used to identify frequent content words, excluding function words via a stoplist.
- **Concordance (KWIC):** Keywords such as *risk*, *care*, *surge*, and *crisis* were analyzed using *Key Word in Context* (KWIC) lines for interpretative analysis.
- **Collocation Analysis:** The *Collocates* tool was used to identify statistically significant word pairings using a ± 5 -word window and scores like Mutual Information (MI).
- **Semantic Clustering:** Concordance lines and collocates were categorized under three themes: (1) the pandemic itself, (2) protection policies, and (3) key public figures. Evaluative expressions were grouped according to Appraisal categories.
- **Interpretation:** Results were interpreted through the lens of CDA and Appraisal Theory, linking micro-level lexical choices to macro-level ideological structures and communicative goals.

4. Data analysis

In this section, we incorporate Attitude, sub-system of Appraisal theory, with CDA and corpus analysis to investigate the evaluative language used in Western news platforms in their coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The two corpora, i.e. the mainstream corpus and the fake news corpus, include news reports that revolve around three main themes: the pandemic itself, protection policies, and key figures represented in the news coverage. The analysis of the data is arranged accordingly, viz. addressing the three themes.

4.1 Covid-19 pandemic and its related issues

This major theme unfolds into several sub-themes: the global insecurity and uncertainty about Covid-19 threats; media wars (i.e. credible vs. fake news) and the challenge of misinformation; the origin of the pandemic, with special reference to China, and relevant conspiracy theories. This theme draws primarily on the *Attitude: Affect* subsystem to highlight the threat and danger associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of its negative impact on public health. The data in the following sub-sections recapitulate the major theme which is configured by both keywords and collocation corpus analysis functions.

4.1.1 Insecurity

The predominant subclass of *Affect* identified in both corpora is **Insecurity**, reflecting emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. This is evident in the results of both the **keywords** and **collocation** functions (i.e., lexical keyness analysis), which reveal that news writers across both corpora consistently employed language marked by negative evaluation when reporting on the pandemic.

As illustrated in Tables (1) and (2), the most frequent keywords in both corpora relate directly to themes of health risk, fear, and instability. Similarly, Tables (3) and (4) display the most frequent **collocates** of the term “Covid-19,” which also reveal a strong tendency toward negative affect and evaluative framing. These collocational patterns emphasize the emotional and ideological weight attributed to the pandemic across different news sources.

Table 1: The most frequent words in the M.Corpus

Keywo rd	Frequen cy	Keywo rd	Frequen cy	Keyword	Frequen cy
1. Health	10871	2. Virus	9304	3. Cases	8446

4. Vaccine	7922	5. Pandemic	7131	6. Government	6310
7. Deaths	5379	8. Positive	5107	9. Patients	4362
10. Number	4237	11. Care	4072	12. Hospital	4058
13. Infections	3783	14. Against	3578	15. Disease	3418

Table 2: the most frequent words in the F. Corpus

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
1. Vaccine	42395	2. Deaths	4034	3. Vaccinated	3166
4. Virus	2754	5. Health	2720	6. Pfizer	2352
7. Data	2348	8. Government	2115	9. Children	2103
10. Pandemic	1718	11. Cases	1716	12. Number	1658
13. Biden	1511	14. Against	1425	15. Media	1421

Table 3: The most frequent collocates of "Covid-19" in the M. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Positive	51070	2. Cases	84460	3. Patients	43620
4. Deaths	53790	5. Vaccine	79220	6. Symptoms	29300
7. Infections	37830	8. Causes	4620	9. Hospital	40580
10. Outbreak	21840	11. Contracting	3230	12. Risk	30790

13. Fight	6860	14. Tackling	1540	15. Surge	14240
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Table 4: the most frequent collocates of “Covid-19” in the F. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Vaccine	73260	2. Deaths	40340	3. Injections	6780
4. Injuries	4530	5. Positive	7310	6. Hospitalizations	4990
7. Cases	17160	8. Vaccine Impact	2090	9. Shots	5320
10. Jab	9710	11. Old	11420	12. Reactions	6030
13. Woman	60304	14. Alleged	4130	15. Experimental	4240

The data in these tables clearly demonstrate that writers across both corpora predominantly relied on the **Insecurity** subclass of *Affect* when reporting on Covid-19-related news. Lexical items such as *deaths*, *risk*, *virus*, *spread*, and *infection* appear frequently and serve to amplify public fear, heighten paranoia, and contribute to death anxiety. Such emotionally charged language may also influence public compliance with health-related preventive measures, including social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination uptake.

In the **Mainstream Corpus (M. Corpus)**, the language of insecurity is primarily associated with news directly addressing the pandemic itself. Frequent collocates of the term *Covid-19* include words such as *cases*, *patients*, *deaths*, *vaccine*, *symptoms*, *infections*, and *outbreak*—all of which emphasize the gravity of the health crisis, and the benefits and importance of covid-19 vaccination. In contrast, the **Fake News Corpus (F. Corpus)** centers the theme of insecurity around the Covid-19 vaccines and their alleged risks. Common collocates in this corpus include *injuries*, *vaccine impact*, *reactions*, *experimental*, *clots*, *victims*, *amputated*, *alopecia*, and *VAERS*. These lexical choices evoke fear and distrust toward medical interventions and highlight how

misinformation discourses may manipulate evaluative language to discourage vaccine compliance.

This contrast is evident in the following illustrative examples:

1. “Coronavirus tracked: How US deaths from Covid-19 compare to other great tragedies; More people have now died from coronavirus in US than Vietnam War, 9/11 and all mass shootings combined. The death toll from the Covid-19 coronavirus in the US has passed 100,000, just four months after the first confirmed case of the deadly virus was reported in the country”. (M. Corpus)

2. The whole world is witnessing a pre-planned and highly organized criminal cover-up of the deaths and injuries and illnesses and diseases and miscarriages directly caused by the various toxic types of COVID-19 injections. This rapidly evolving international criminal conspiracy to foist an extremely hazardous ‘vaccine’ upon the entire planetary civilization is completely without precedent. But what makes it a truly genocidal crime wave washing over the planet is the extraordinary intention to enforce such a comprehensive and complex cover-up of the never-ending crime spree. To date, there are countless proven cases of deaths, injuries and illness which have occurred right after people have received the different Covid jabs. (F. Corpus)

In Example 1, insecurity is caused by comparing the **sheer number of deaths** to other historical tragedies, thus inciting fear through **magnitude and impact**. In contrast, Example 2 constructs insecurity through **conspiracy and distrust**, using emotionally charged and morally evaluative language (“*toxic*,” “*genocidal*”

crime wave,” “*criminal conspiracy*”) that attributes intentional harm and cover-up, reflecting deep ideological bias.

4.1.2 Media

Media wars another sub-theme related to the pandemic. The word “*media*” is represented differently across the two corpora, reflecting distinct ideological views toward the reliability of information and media coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is evident in the most frequent **collocates** of the word “*media*” in each corpus, as shown in **Figures (1) and (2)** below. The data were visualized using the **WordCloud function** in AntConc (Version 4.2.4), which represents word frequency or collocational strength through relative size. In figures (1) and (2), **larger and bolder words signify higher frequency or stronger association** with the target term “*media*”.

In the **M. Corpus**, common collocates include terms such as “*social,*” “*outlets,*” “*misinformation,*” “*reported,*” “*Chinese,*” “*conspiracy,*” “*coverage,*” and “*circulating.*” These collocates indicate a focus on *the accountability of media producers*, the risk of misinformation (often through social platforms), and the reporting on key events and origins related to the pandemic. The lexical choices here highlight the media’s *role as an information source*. yet acknowledging the challenges of misinformation facing mainstream news outlets.

In contrast, in the **F. Corpus**, frequent collocates of “*media*” include “*mainstream,*” “*fake,*” “*censored,*” “*bias,*” “*government,*” “*Chinese,*” and “*hide.*” These lexical choices reflect a **skeptical and accusatory tone**, thus framing the media as a manipulative tool for executing governmental agendas. Such representation seeks to discredit mainstream news reporting and promote a narrative of suppression and deception, which results in increased public distrust toward official sources of information, represented mainly in mainstream news platforms.



Fig. 1 the most frequent collocates of the word “Media” in the M. Corpus



Fig. 2 the most frequent collocates of the word “Media” in the F. Corpus

4.1.3 China

Returning to both the **keywords** and **collocation** functions, the analysis reveals an obvious pattern of frequent negative references to *China* across both corpora. Prominent keywords such as “*China*,” “*Chinese*,” and “*Wuhan*” indicate that both

mainstream and **fake news** sources frequently referred to China in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is illustrated in **Figures (3) and (4) below**, which display the most frequent **collocates** of the word “*China*” in each corpus.

The consistent association of China with the virus contributes to a **negative evaluative framing**, where China is positioned as **responsible** for the spread of Covid-19. This framing, directly or indirectly, contributes to **public division**, and **to** the rise of **xenophobic sentiment** during the pandemic. However, the **F. Corpus** reveals even stronger ideological framing. Collocates such as “*lied*,” “*lab*,” “*smuggled*,” and “*threat*” suggest a **conspiratorial narrative**, implying that the virus was **man-made**, **deliberately released**, or linked to **bioweapon theories**. This type of framing constructs China not only as the origin of the virus, but as a **deliberate actor**, thus inciting distrust, political polarization, and discourses of fear and accusations.

This difference is clearly illustrated in the following two examples, extracted from each corpus:

3. “He also urged Mr Trump to improve China-US relations after the US president angered officials in Beijing by referring to coronavirus as the “China virus” because it was first identified there”. (M. Corpus)

4. President Trump is absolutely correct to withhold funding from the World Health Organization if they were indeed complicit in assisting China in a massive cover-up. The Chinese Communist Party was literally lecturing people that it was “racist” to call the coronavirus a “Chinese” virus or say that it originated in Wuhan as they spread disinformation. China Lied, People Died and the WHO was complicit. We need to rethink how we interact with both China and the WHO going forward. (F. Corpus)

These examples demonstrate how the two corpora represent ideologically distinct narratives about China's role in the Covid-19 pandemic. In example (3), from the M. Corpus, the language maintains a more neutral and diplomatic tone. The evaluative stance is not obvious and implies that Trump's naming practice is deemed controversial. The phrase "angered officials in Beijing" reflects Affect: Discontent, while "urged Mr Trump to improve relations" suggests a call for resolution and cooperation, thus reflecting a less judgmental framing of China. The example (4), from the F. corpus, shows the use of extremely evaluative and affective language. It includes explicit expressions of Judgment: Propriety (e.g., "China Lied"), and Appreciation of Trump's actions ("absolutely correct"). It uses intensifiers and amplification strategies ("literally lecturing people," "massive cover-up," "complicit") to convey certainty and moral outrage. The blaming slogan "China Lied, People Died" heightened the negative judgment of China and the WHO.



Fig. 3 the most frequent collocates of the word “China” in the M. Corpus



Figure 3 the most frequent collocates of the word “China” in the F. Corpus

4.2 Key figures and other social groups

This second major theme covers the representation of key figures and other relevant social groups featured in Covid-19 news. These include world leaders, notable virologist and scientists, doctors and health staff, and vaccinate and unvaccinated people. The theme depends mainly on Attitude-Judgement to negatively or positively evaluate human behavior.

4.2.1 Doctors and NHS staff

In the M. Corpus *doctors and NHS staff* are positively represented, by acknowledging their efforts and sacrifices which saved people's lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is evident in the most frequent collocates of doctors and NHS staff, in table (7) below. The most employed subcategories of Judgment describing doctors and NHS staff in the M. Corpus are *Capacity and Tenacity*, as shown in examples 1 and 2 below, from the M. Corpus.

Table 4: the most frequent collocates of doctors and NHS staff in the M. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Frontline	2640	2. Experts	18620	3. Trust	5690
4. Care	40720	5. Protect	11490	6. Cope	2020
7. Save	3320	8. Advises	960	9. Help	23170
10. Facing	4030				

5. "From my experience of being infected by the virus, I cannot describe the respect I have for doctors and nurses who sacrifice their time and own safety to help patients recover," "I must thank them for taking such good care of me as well as to those who continue to help people affected by the Covid-19," "The medical front liners have and will always be heroes," (M. Corpus)

6. "Speaking to French radio about the doctor's death, the health minister said he wanted to draw attention to the "extraordinary courage" that doctors, nurses, firefighters and everyone who helps save lives show every day". (M. Corpus)

In examples (5) and (6), both *Capacity* and *Tenacity* are evident in expressions such as "The medical front liners have and will always be heroes," "extraordinary courage," and "sacrifice time/safety." Additionally, phrases like "medical experts," "their efforts," "helps save lives," and "taking such good care" serve to emphasize the competence, dedication, and reliability of doctors and NHS staff.

In contrast, the F. Corpus presents several negative evaluations of doctors and NHS staff, as reflected in their most frequent collocates shown in Table (8). These healthcare professionals are often depicted negatively through the subcategories of *Capacity* and *Tenacity*, suggesting that they are incapable (e.g., "unable to save him," "unable to help") and unreliable (e.g., "overworked," "struggling"). This is illustrated in

examples (7) and (8) below. Moreover, negative framing extends to the subcategories of Veracity and Propriety, implying that doctors and NHS staff are untrustworthy (e.g., “disinform,” “manipulate,” “doctors have repeatedly allowed themselves to be tricked, cajoled and bought”) and ethically compromised, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine (e.g., “betrayed,” “complicit”), as demonstrated in examples (9) and (10). Nevertheless, a minority of doctors in the F. Corpus are positively evaluated under the Tenacity subcategory, portrayed as honest and courageous for exposing alleged misinformation by governments and the media, as reflected in example (11).

Table 5: the most frequent collocates of doctors and NHS staff in the F. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Frail	330	2. Censorship	840	3. Honest	910
4. Reject	270	5. Refuse	960	6. Experienced	1140
7. Blame	1970	8. Disinform	20	9. Withheld	140
10. Exposes	360	11. Overwhelmed	770	12. Burden	290
13. Fudging	90	14. Agitation	40	15. Overworked	60

7. “Rajkumar was treated at a hospital in Bengaluru where **doctors were unable to save him**” (F. Corpus).

8. “Doctors protest that they are **overworked and that they are struggling to deal with a continuing crisis**. But they’re working three day weeks. It’s no wonder patients are more likely to win the lottery than get an appointment with their doctor”. (F. Corpus)

9. “**The American Medical Association (AMA) has instructed doctors to disinform the general public** by using psychological and linguistic tools in **order to manipulate them into getting the Covid-19**

vaccine. AMA Then Instructs Doctors on How to Disinform It's a disappointment, the AMA explicitly instructs doctors to swap out certain words and terms for other, more narrative-affirming choices. Shockingly, this includes swapping “hospitalization rates” to “deaths” — two terms that are not even remotely interchangeable! It strains credulity that the AMA would actually tell doctors to substitute a factual data point with an outright lie”. (F. Corpus)

10. “The medical establishment sold out decades ago, and over the years I have been staggered by the way the BMA and the GMC have betrayed patients, and the way doctors have repeatedly allowed themselves to be tricked, cajoled and bought. Doctors have repeatedly misdiagnosed dementia. And they have prescribed huge quantities of dangerously addictive benzodiazepine drugs. Today, the medical profession is complicit in the Government's genocidal attack on the people it is paid to serve.” (F. Corpus)

11. “The Global Summit Doctors and other brave medical practitioners who have stood up to the lies and tyranny – who have been harassed, jobs lost, medical licenses lost, smeared and libeled are right. They were right, and chances are there are still many more revelations to come that will fully deconstruct the myth that the CDC, or any other government agency for that matter, is working in the best interests of the general public.” (F. Corpus)

4.2.2 Pro-Vaccine/Vaccinated and Anti-Vaccine-Unvaccinated People

As previously noted, *Judgement* concerns the evaluation of human behavior. In this context, contrasting representations of vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals are evident across the two corpora. Specifically, the F. Corpus negatively evaluates vaccinated individuals, whereas the M. Corpus applies negative evaluations to the unvaccinated. This contrast appears in the most frequent collocates of “unvaccinated” in the M. Corpus and “vaccinated” in the F. Corpus, as shown in Tables (9) and (10).

Table 6 the most frequent collocates of the unvaccinated in the M. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Ignorance	110	2. Die	4710	3. Hospitalized	2570
4. Persuade	480	5. Unafraid	20	6. Consequences	2120
7. Discriminate	180				

Table 7 and the most frequent collocates of the vaccinated in the F. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Deaths	40340	2. Hospitalisations	4990	3. Children	21030
4. Shocking	2880	5. Immune	9840	6. Mortality	5440
7. Age	10670	8. Worse	3480	9. Unfortunately	2280
10. ICU	670	11. Frightening	290	12. Wheelchair	150
13. Adverse	12010	14. Whistleblower	1550	15. Evidence	7670

In the M. Corpus, unvaccinated individuals are negatively represented particularly through the *Tenacity* subcategory of *Judgement*, with “ignorance” appearing as a frequent collocate.

Other terms such as “die,” “hospitalized,” and “consequences” reinforce a negative evaluative frame. This framing constructs unvaccinated individuals as irresponsible or irrational and may incite social division and stigmatization of anti-vaccine individuals. Examples (12) and (13) illustrate how the discourse attributes blame and moral responsibility, to those refusing vaccination. For instance, the unvaccinated are sometimes portrayed as deserving of their misfortunes, which is described as a form of poetic justice by quoted experts.

12. By today's low standards, though, the tide of vitriol **against those who oppose vaccination** is astounding. The pandemic has unleashed Reddit forums and websites devoted to exhorting **the ignorance of the unvaccinated**, with members ready to pile on once an anti-vaxxer dies from COVID-19. A common refrain is **"you only have yourself to blame,"** often expressed online as, **"Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."** Their delight seems more than mere schadenfreude. Colin Wayne Leach, a Barnard College psychology professor, told The New York Times that this is **"not just taking a little pleasure in somebody's misfortune. In many ways, it's seeing your enemies suffer because of what they believe. That is the sweetest justice."**

13. Attention has turned to **the problem of vaccine hesitancy** after health secretary Matt Hancock said that **most of those hospitalised by the Covid-19 Indian variant in Bolton were eligible for the jab but had not received one.** Speaking to Sky News on Sunday (16 May), Hancock said that early results from tests at Oxford University gave a "high degree of confidence" that **vaccines work against the B1.617.2 strain of Covid-19**, commonly referred to as the India variant. **He urged anyone who has not taken up the offer of a vaccine to do so now**, warning that **the**

Indian variant can "spread like wildfire" among unvaccinated groups. Andrew Lloyd Webber says **Covid vaccine refusers are as bad as drink-drivers**

Conversely, in the F. Corpus, vaccinated individuals are negatively evaluated, again through the *Tenacity* subcategory. Collocates such as “deaths,” “hospitalisations,” “wheelchair,” and “adverse” link vaccination to severe physical consequences, implying vaccine-related harm. This negative representation may discourage individuals from getting vaccinated by fueling fear and mistrust. The government is negatively evaluated, by using the *Propriety* subcategory of *Judgement*, with terms such as “immoral,” “force,” and “kidnap” suggesting coercive or unethical behavior in promoting vaccination. Examples (14) and (15) illustrate how this discourse constructs the government as an unprincipled actor, accused of violating personal freedoms and prioritizing vaccinated individuals at the expense of others.

14. Every person who has signed up to be tested for covid-19 — or who runs a contact tracing app on their mobile device — is being funneled into a government database that **will soon be used to hunt people down for forced vaccinations.** What the Democrats want is **armed vaccination teams** going from private home to private home, **forcing people to be vaccinated at gunpoint, or kidnapping them and taking them to FEMA-like “quarantine camps” for processing.** (In reality, they are being taken to **death camps for executions**, see below...)

15. **Are governments creating two classes of people — the vaccinated and the unvaccinated?** It would be **immoral** if we did that. And yet...that seems to be what is happening. The idea of “**vaccine passports**” is just the tip of the iceberg. Now it appears that government shelters during a natural disaster are **conditional on vaccination status.** “Keep calm and **protect yourself**

from the virus,” says the Prime Minister as a massive volcano erupts and threatens thousands of lives while he prioritizes the lives of the vaccinated. Unbelievable. Is this the “new normal” — prioritizing people’s lives based on their vaccination status which, in some cases, is completely out of their control?

4.2.3 Dr. Fauci

In terms of the Judgement subsystem, the representation of Dr. Anthony Fauci varies significantly between the two corpora. In the M. Corpus, Fauci is represented highly positively as a competent, reliable, and authoritative medical expert. These evaluations rely on Capacity and Tenacity subcategories of Judgement. Here, Fauci is presented as someone the public can depend on for scientifically grounded guidance regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. His association with trusted institutions and global campaigns, such as the #PassTheMic initiative, reinforces his credibility and status as a leading expert in public health. This positive framing is evident in examples (16) and (17) and is also supported by the frequent collocates of the word “Fauci” in the M. Corpus, as shown in Figure (10).

16. Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the top US experts on infectious diseases, said he is “really confident” that recovered coronavirus patients will have immunity, in an interview with The Daily Show.

17. Dr. Anthony Fauci is set to participate alongside other experts in a worldwide campaign to spread Covid-19 awareness, and takeover Julia Robert's Instagram in the process. The American actress is among multiple A-listers who will hand over their social media accounts to leading experts on coronavirus amid the pandemic as part of the #PassTheMic campaign. Dr

Fauci, who has advised the White House since the start of the US pandemic as an infectious diseases expert, will start the social media takeovers on Ms Robert's Instagram on Thursday. The three weeks long campaign will put both **frontline workers and experts in front of millions, and provide global perspectives on how to beat the pandemic.**



Fig. 4 the most frequent collocates of the word “Fauci” in the M. Corpus

In contrast, the F. Corpus represents Fauci negatively, shedding doubts on his credibility and trustworthiness through repeated attacks on his character and expertise. He is presented as deceptive and unreliable, by using multiple subcategories of Judgement including Capacity, Tenacity, Veracity, and Propriety. These negative representations are intended to undermine his ability to inform the public and suggest that his motivations are questionable or manipulative. Terms such as “Covidictator,” “Little Lord Fauci,” “Smurf,” and sarcastic labels like “saint” or “lord” show the rewriters attempts to ridicule his authority. This portrayal may encourage readers to disregard his guidance or view it with skepticism. Examples (18) and (19), alongside the most frequent collocates in Figure (11), clearly illustrate this evaluative stance.

18. Not long ago, **Little Lord Fauci** himself tut-tutted America telling us that vaccines might keep you safe from infection but won't keep you from accidentally infecting others. **Little Lord Fauci tends to be the**

lightning rod for most of our criticism. Part of the reason even some ‘moderates’ have become **distrustful of the vaccine is directly related to the suppression of any ill effects.** **The Lying Pervaricating Smurf, Little Lord Fauci** didn’t make matters any better when he **admitted** on multiple occasions to telling the public things he didn’t believe were true because he thought **they would push us to the behavior he wanted us to take.**

19. The widespread use of masks wasn't something that even Saint Fauci was ready to sign onto due to the mask shortage. Not only that, there was some question about the efficacy of masks and the "false sense of security" they could provide within the medical community. **It was hardly "settled science."**

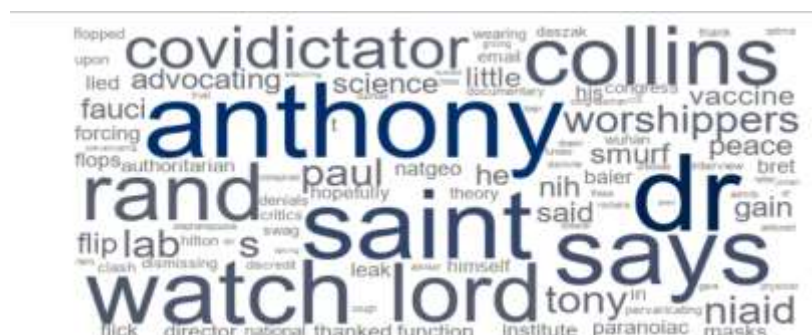


Fig. 5 the most frequent collocates of the word “Fauci” in the F. Corpus.

4.2.4 Trump and Biden

In terms of the Judgement subsystem, the representations of Donald Trump and Joe Biden differ significantly between the two corpora. In the M. Corpus, Trump is negatively evaluated across the Tenacity, Capacity, and Propriety subcategories. He is presented as an unqualified president, who lacks competence and reliability in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples (20) and (21) show how news reports criticize his opposition to

scientific guidelines, downplaying the severity of the virus, and promoting unscientific treatments (e.g. suggesting disinfectants and bleach as possible cures). These linguistic choices present Trump as untrustworthy and morally questionable, which reinforces negative evaluations of his leadership. The frequent collocates of "Trump" in the M. Corpus (see Table 11) further reflect this negative representation.

Conversely, in the F. Corpus, Trump is represented more favorably. He is positively evaluated in terms of Tenacity and Capacity, especially by highlighting his achievements and efforts in handling the pandemic despite harsh criticism from his opponents. These evaluations often appear in the context of what is termed "Trump Derangement Syndrome," a strategy used to discredit critics by implying that their opposition is irrational or politically motivated. Examples (22) and (23) exemplify this defensive framing. Table 12 illustrates the most frequent collocates of "Trump" in the F. Corpus that reinforce this presentation.

Table 8: the most frequent collocates of Trump in the M. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. President	37530	2. Administration	11920	3. Supporters	1760
4. Claimed	4380	5. Mocks	110	6. Criticized	1980
7. Hydroxychloroquine	1930	8. Lying	580	9. Unproven	440
10. Pushed	2010	11. Disinfectant	660	12. Downplay	300
13. Falsely	660	14. Attacking	510	15. Bleach	360

Table 9: the most frequent collocates of Trump in the F. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. President	10660	2. Administration	7730	3. Supporters	520
4. Trump Derangement Syndrome	120	5. Reelection	110	6. Vote	1560

7. Accomplishments	130	8. Trump Era	510	9. Response	6000
10. Plan	2550	11. Win	750		

20. Robert Redford **blasts Trump's response to coronavirus: 'He failed to understand scientific consensus'**; the US president **failed "to embrace or even understand sound scientific consensus"**. The actor broached the topic in an opinion piece he signed with his son James Redford, published by NBC News. Titled "**Trump's coronavirus failures** offer warnings and lessons about future climate change challenges". "Some lessons have been **bitter**. Here in the US, we have **seen the cost of failed leadership**". In November last year, he penned a different opinion piece for NBC News, calling **Trump's presidency a "monarchy in disguise" threatening "everything this country stands for"**. (M. Corpus)

21. **Mr Trump's bullish talk about "reopening" the US within weeks ended swiftly** when advisers presented him with models predicting those figures, Dr Fauci told American media on 29 March. **The president was forced to extend emergency measures** until at least the end of April amid **sustained criticism of his approach**, which has included **repeatedly downplaying the outbreak** - he **claimed** previously that US cases would soon be "close to zero" and that **Covid-19 was like the flu** - feuding publicly with state governors over whether they really needed the support they were asking for, and **making false claims** about the availability of testing kits. Now, Mr Trump **admits** that the US is facing "a very bad two, and maybe three weeks" as the outbreak peaks. (M. Corpus)

22. One of the **absolute worst examples of Trump Derangement Syndrome in reportage** has been **the insistence that the President was spreading "false**

hope” by mentioning the possibility that some drugs—specifically chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine—showed some promise in treating COVID-19 patients. Trump was citing information that had been provided by experts, including some seemingly successful treatment of COVID-19 in other countries using chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. A paper published in the medical journal The Lancet two years ago noted that the antimalarial drug had been successful in treating viral diseases like HIV and SARS. (F. Corpus)

23. Finally, the Corporate Media suffering from widespread Trump Derangement Syndrome simply didn’t want to admit that Trump might actually be right about the origin of the virus. Corporate Media Hacks Admit They Didn’t Cover The Wuhan Lab Leak Story Because Trump Backed It. Some people in the Corporate Media are finally at the acceptance stage of their Trump Derangement Syndrome™. While it came too late to change the constant negative coverage, we can now show them for the hacks that they really are. (F. Corpus)

Joe Biden, on the other hand, receives more positive evaluations in the M. Corpus. He is presented as dependable and capable, particularly through his commitment to managing the pandemic crisis. This is evident in Biden’s commissive speech acts, where Biden promises future actions such as free testing, vaccine deployment, and support for public health initiatives. These statements boost his positive evaluation within the Tenacity and Capacity subcategories, portraying him as a rational and science-driven leader. Examples (24) and (25), alongside the frequent collocates shown in Table 13, reinforce this representation.

Table 10: the most frequent collocates of Biden in the M. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. President	28380	2. Administration	11920	3. Plan	10770
4. Announced	16830	5. Said	233170	6. Mandate	3780
7. Dispatch	170	8. Distribute	910	9. Send	2360
10. Pledged	770	11. Strategy	4110	12. Unveils	180
13. Relief	3710	14. Control	16550	15. Proposed	1100

24. Biden tells Trump to 'listen to the scientists' and calls for nationwide mask rule to prevent coronavirus spread. Biden has criticised Mr Trump's decision to return to the White House on Monday after just three nights in hospital, condemning his maskless appearance on the Truman Balcony as "macho" and lacking in consideration of a virus that has killed more than 210,000 Americans. "Be patriotic, for God's sake." Earlier on Monday, Mr Biden had said he was offering his continued "prayers" for Mr Trump's and First Lady Melania Trump's recoveries from their Covid-19 diagnoses. But he also admonished the president to "listen to the scientists" and "support masks" to help stem the tide of coronavirus in the US. (M. Coprus)

25. Joe Biden promises a decisive public health response that ensures the wide availability of free testing; the elimination of cost barriers to preventive care and treatment; the development of a vaccine; and the deployment of necessary supplies and personnel. The planned economic response would initially focus on workers, families, and small businesses, as well as progressive macroeconomic measures. Biden said his first priority was to "get control of the virus" because the economy can't move forward without stemming the

disease. "As I said before, **I will shut down the virus, not the economy,**" (M. Corpus)

However, in the F. Corpus, Biden is negatively evaluated across multiple subcategories, including Capacity, Tenacity, Veracity, and Propriety. Writers in the F. Corpus often refer to him by his first name "Joe" rather than "President," and use collocates such as "administration" (instead of "president"), suggesting his perceived lack of authority. He is often depicted as mimicking Trump's policies and unfairly taking credit for success. Table 14 illustrates the negative collocates of "Biden" in the F. Corpus, supported by examples (26) and (27).

Table 11 the most frequent collocates of Biden in the F. Corpus

Collocat e	Frequen cy	Collocate	Frequen cy	Collocate	Frequen cy
1. Joe	6150	2. Administrati on	7730	3. President	10660
4. Harris	2320	5. Deaths	40340	6. Vaccine	73260
7. Obama	1470	8. Democrats	4320	9. Mandate	2630
10. Blames	290	11. Crisis	2640	12. Impersonat or	30
13. Defensi ve	110	14. Disagreed	120	15. Risk	12380

26. On Labor Day, **President Trump** had a presser and discussed **the worrying rise of China** and their increased global influence and **noted that China has been "taking advantage of stupid people" for years and said that "Biden is a stupid person."** **The President is right again. Joe Biden is a lot of things but smart is not one of them.** But given that **the lab leak** (deliberate or accidental) came from Wuhan, and given **the Chinese cover up** and given the **Fauci**

denials exposed by Senator Rand Paul, and given the NIH, NIAID cover ups and the US Intelligence services cover up, when their 3 month long report into the origin of Covid-19 ordered by presidential impersonator Biden yielded nothing, and given the relationships between the NIAID, the NIH, the WIV, the EcoHealth Alliance, the University of North Carolina and Moderna, I cannot see any room for anyone else. (F. Corpus)

27. Joe has said that mask-wearing isn't a "political statement" though it has clearly become that for many people, including his campaign team who created a video to COVID-shame the President for contracting a highly contagious virus because he didn't stay hidden in the basement for 6 months. Here is Biden saying that wearing a mask is "following the science" and should be embraced by everyone. (Note that he's not wearing a mask while saying this.) Here is Joe giving a speech in a mask still COVID-shaming President Trump and urging him to embrace a national mask mandate. But the thing is, many times when Biden does wear a mask, he doesn't wear it correctly. (F. Corpus)

It is worth mentioning that the representation of leadership is ideologically driven in the F. Corpus through the frequent association of the term "president" with Trump more than with Biden. This framing contributes to the narrative that Biden is not a legitimate or capable leader, while Trump remains the true figure of authority. Figures (7), (8), and (9) further illustrate these collocational patterns. In fact, the portrayal of Trump vs. Biden in both corpora reflects underlying broader ideologies. While newswriters in the mainstream news corpus represent the opinions and beliefs of science-driven elite, fake news writers mainly address proponents of populism and nationalism. **This dichotomy reveals how linguistic choices and evaluative framing in news**

discourse not only inform readers but also shape public perception, reinforcing ideological divides and political identities.



Collocate	Rank	Freq(Scaled)	Freq	Range	Likelihood	Effect	
Trump	1	12780	7	254	1	1251.367	4.823
Biden	2	19181	23	173	1	756.470	4.099

Fig. 7 the most frequent Collocates of the word President in the F. Corpus



AntConc

File Edit Settings Help

Target Corpus

Name: temp

Files: 1

Tokens: 145060

Collocate Types: 57 Collocate Tokens: 3924 Page Size: 100 Lines 1 to 87 of 87 hits

Collocate	Rank	Freq(Scaled)	Freq	Range	Likelihood	Effect
the	1	8130	287	12	1	1715.478 3.352
administration	2	7740	6	162	1	885.537 4.171
president	3	18660	173	23	1	756.470 4.099
harris	4	2520	6	108	3	655.747 3.817

Complete File Name Data View

Fig. 8 the word president in relation to Biden in the F. Corpus

AntConc

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Target Corpus

Name: temp

File: 1

Tokens: 140000

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Plot

File View

Cluster

16-grams

Collocates

Word

Keyword

Wordcloud

Collocate Types: 34

Collocate Tokens: 215

Page Size: 100 hits

1 to 34 of 34 hits

Collocate	Rank	Freq(Scaled)	Freq	Range	Likelihood	Effect
president	1	18660	254	7	1	1251.367 4.823
donald	2	910	88	0	1	674.931 4.823
administration	3	7740	4	113	1	885.537 4.171
i	4	120100	60	237	1	217.641 1.423
supporters	5	520	4	21	1	153.080 3.759
disengagement	6	120	1	12	1	101.059 6.871

Fig. 6 the word president in relation to Trump in the F. Corpus

4.3 Covid-19 protection policies

This major theme covers covid-19 protection policies such as vaccine, lockdown, face masking and social distancing. This theme primarily depends on the Appreciation sub-system, which is concerned with positively or negatively evaluating

“things” like policies and plans and how these policies/plans can be considered harmful or significant/beneficial.

4.3.1 Vaccination

Vaccine as one of the protection policies is positively evaluated in the M. Corpus. M. Corpus writers present vaccines as effective protection policy that is safe and successful. This is clear through the most frequent collocates of the word “vaccine” in table (15) and the following examples below extracted from the M. Corpus. The most frequent collocates of the word “vaccine” in the M. Corpus include words like “effective”, “safe”, and “successful”. These positive evaluations of vaccines may urge the public to consider vaccines as an important protection policy, which in turn may motivate the public to get vaccinated.

Table 12 the most frequent collocates of the word “vaccine” in the M. Corpus

Collocat e	Frequenc y	Collocat	Frequenc y	Collocat e	Frequenc y
1. Doses	16740	2. Rollout	3990	3. Effective	10710
4. Received	14080	5. Booster	15760	6. Mandates	2770
7. Hesitancy	820	8. Approved	5750	9. Trials	5720
10. Available	13130	11. Administered	3220	12. Safe	10460
13. Passports	900	14. Efficacy	1880	15. Bivalent	1100

28. A light at the end of what could be a very long tunnel would be a vaccine to effectively treat the disease and allow life to try to return to normal. Experts point out the disease has disrupted and devastated life in ways we are struggling to conceive. The University of Oxford said its tests, involving up to 510 volunteers in the Thames Valley region, would "provide valuable information on the safety aspects of the vaccine, as well as its ability to generate an immune response against the virus". Dr Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), told the outlet that the NIH is making sure the safety of the vaccine is a high priority. (M. Corpus)

29. "Today, with confidence in science & at the direction of the Office of the Attending Physician, I received the COVID-19 vaccine," Ms Pelosi wrote. "As the vaccine is being distributed, we must all continue mask wearing, social distancing & other science-based steps to save lives & crush the virus." Mr McConnell also issued a message supporting the roll-out. "Just received the safe, effective COVID vaccine following continuity-of-government protocols. Vaccines are how we beat this virus," he wrote. (M. Corpus)

On the contrary, newswriters in the F. Corpus negatively evaluated vaccines through the *frequent reference to its severe side effects, deaths, and the injuries resulting from it*. This is evident in the most the most frequent collocates of the word "vaccine" in table (16) and the following examples (30) and (31) below, extracted from the F. Corpus. The most frequent collocates of the word "vaccine" in the F. Corpus include the words "injuries", "dies", and "side effects". These negative evaluations of vaccines may result in making the public refrain from getting vaccinated (vaccine hesitancy) because of the alleged dangerous side effect. Here, vaccination is depicted as a harmful unnecessary policy

imposed and made mandatory by governments, especially the Democrats.

Table 13 the most frequent collocates of the word “vaccine” in the F. Corpus.

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Injuries	4530	Dies	5410	3. Woman	6030
4. Surveillance	2270	5. Adverse	12010	6. Clots	2640
7. Side Effects	5570	8. Passports	700	9. VAERS	4660
10. Reactions	6030	11. Victims	1310	12. Vaccine Impact	2090
13. Hesitancy	400	14. Inflammation	2130	15. Amputated	320

30. What you need to understand is that the globalists have now decided to eliminate the “useless eaters” of the world, which in their view is about 90% of the global population. They are going for the stupid people first: the ones who line up to be injected with vaccines that are obviously engineered to destroy lives rather than protect them. (F. Corpus)

31. The whole world is witnessing a pre-planned and highly organized criminal cover-up of the deaths and injuries and illnesses and diseases and miscarriages directly caused by the various toxic types of COVID-19 injections. This rapidly evolving international criminal conspiracy to foist an extremely hazardous ‘vaccine’ upon the entire planetary civilization is completely without precedent. But what makes it a truly genocidal crime wave washing over the planet is the extraordinary intention to enforce such a comprehensive and complex cover-up of the never-ending crime spree. (F. Corpus)

4.3.2 Lockdowns, face masking, and social distancing

Regarding lockdowns, face masking, and social distancing as key protective measures against the Covid-19 pandemic,

newswriters in the M. Corpus consistently framed these policies as necessary, government-enforced strategies aimed at effectively managing the crisis. Although portrayed as strict and sometimes limiting, these measures were justified as essential to curbing the spread of the virus and minimizing its harmful impact. This evaluative framing may contribute to encouraging public compliance by reinforcing the legitimacy and urgency of the actions taken. This perspective is clearly demonstrated in examples (32) and (33) extracted from the M. Corpus, along with the most frequent collocates of the terms “lockdowns,” “masks,” and “social distancing” presented in tables (17), (18), and (19), respectively.

Table 17: *The most frequent collocates of "lockdowns" in the M. Corpus.*

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Strict	3240	2. Restrictions	25860	3. Imposed	3280
4. Curfews	290	5. Mandates	2770	6. Enforced	780
7. Toughest	380	8. Harsh	580	9. Brutal	370
10. Drastic	460				

Table 18 *The most frequent collocates of "masks" in the M. Corpus*

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Mandatory	4050	2. Defend	1280	3. Against	35780
4. Required	7580	5. Protect	11490	6. Compulsory	870
7. Precautions	2230	8. Save	3320	9. Urged	6240
10. Obligatory	120				

Table 19: The most frequent collocates of "social distancing" in the M. Corpus.

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Adhere	410	2. Restrictions	25860	3. Strict	3240
4. Observe	460	5. Mandatory	4050	6. Implemented	1720
7. Advice	7160	8. Advocating	220	9. Guidance	7760
10. Enforce	830				

32. Germany allowed small businesses to open earlier this month and the country's 16 states have introduced **varying rules on wearing face masks in public**, with the use **of cloth masks now mandatory on public transport and, in most regions**, in shops. The country has been viewed as one of **Europe's most successful in tackling the coronavirus pandemic, thanks to widespread testing, and has recorded a significantly lower death toll than other countries** such as Italy, Spain and the UK. (M. Corpus)

33. In the report, **non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as face masks, social distancing mandates, restrictions of gatherings and stay-at-home orders are credited with reducing transmission of the virus** while there remains no vaccine or effective treatment. For example, researchers estimate around 130,000 lives **could be saved if a universal mask police was implemented in the country. "Expanding mask use is one of the easy wins for the United States ... and can save many lives,"** Mr Murray said. (M. Coprus)

In contrast, writers in the F. Corpus framed Covid-19 protection policies, such as lockdowns, face masking, and social distancing, as excessive, coercive, and unnecessary. Instead of being portrayed as scientifically based measures to control the spread of the virus, these policies were represented as violations of personal freedoms, imposed by authoritarian officials. Moreover,

individuals or institutions supporting these measures were often described using pejorative labels such as “zealots,” “Covidictators,” and even “Nazis.”

This representation contributes to a populist discourse that regards government-mandated health measures as oppressive actions rather than responsible governance. Consequently, this discourse may contribute to public non-compliance with health guidelines, undermining collective efforts to manage the pandemic. These evaluative strategies are clearly illustrated in examples (34) and (35), extracted from the F. Corpus and the most frequent collocates of “lockdowns,” “masks,” and “social distancing” presented in Tables (4.19), (4.20), and (4.21) respectively.

Table 20: The most frequent collocates of "lockdowns" in the A. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Anti	3580	2. Zealots	190	3. Restrictions	2760
4. Harsh	550	5. Arrested	1140	6. Protest	1650
7. Imposed	850	8. Strict	300	9. Covidictators	1120
10. Criticizing	170				

Table 21: The most frequent collocates of "masks" in the A. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Nazis	200	2. Sociopaths	80	3. Fauci	10670
4. Covidictator	440	5. Mandatory	1100	6. Flopping	70
7. Admits	950	8. Prohibits	90	9. Graphene	2510
10. Useless	290				

Table 22: The most frequent collocates of "social distancing" in the A. Corpus

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
1. Sociopaths	80	2. Nazis	200	3. Fools	140
4. Arbitrary	160	5. Enforce	540		

34. Are public health officials and the mainstream media really telling the public scientific accurate and correct information about the Coronavirus and treatment for COVID-19? Was there any scientific or medical basis for governments to impose a lockdown? Are the government-media complex irresponsibly spreading misinformation about COVID-19? Is this misinformation harming the public and causing needless suffering and additional deaths? Apparently, yes. (F. Corpus)

35. Politicians put 15 million people out of work. That increased the unemployment rate by 8.2 percent. Earlier, we've seen the opioid death rate increase by 3.6 percent for each percent increase in the unemployment rate. The Lockdown Zealots are always talking about The Science™ but there is no science that supports these aggressive, repeated lockdowns. (F. Corpus)

This contrasting representation of protective measures reflects a broader ideological divide between the mainstream news and fake news discourses analyzed in this study. As previously discussed, the mainstream corpus tends to align with science-informed, institutional vision that supports the compliance with public health measures during the pandemic. This is consistent with the positive portrayal of key figures such as Fauci and Biden and the negative framing of those seen as undermining scientific

consensus, like Trump and anti-vaxxers. On the other hand, the news reporting in the F. Corpus, which draws on populist and nationalist ideologies, often discredits these same institutions and figures and questions the legitimacy of the pandemic management policies, thus casting doubt on the intentions of public health authorities.

Together, these findings demonstrate how differing ideological views influence the use of evaluative language in pandemic reporting. Mainstream media most often support narratives of collective responsibility, science-driven action, and institutional credibility, whereas fake news reporting often mobilize distrust and populist antagonism toward elites. These discursive patterns not only influence how public health measures are received but also contribute to broader narratives of social division and antagonism during global crises.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study has demonstrated how the sub-system *Attitude* of the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) can be integrated with corpus analysis and critical discourse analytical framework, to investigate how different Western news sites (mainstream and fake) employed evaluative language, when covering the Covid-19 pandemic and its related issues. The analysis focused on three key themes: the pandemic itself, protective health policies, and the representation of public figures and relevant social groups. The findings provide important insights into how news language, often taken as accurate and objective, is in fact ideologically driven.

The results demonstrate that the *Attitude* sub-system, particularly its three sub-categories (Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation), was strategically used across both corpora to shape public perceptions about the Covid-19 crisis. However, the use of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation varied significantly depending on the ideological orientation of the news source.

While insecurity was prevalent in both corpora, it was exploited differently in the two corpora. For example, mainstream news (M. Corpus) emphasized fear, risks and the role of social responsibility in curbing the covid-19 pandemic. This was evident in the frequent use of lexical items highlighting risk (e.g., “infection,” “death,” “spread”) and the positive evaluation of figures like Dr. Fauci and President Biden, by using Judgment (Capacity and Tenacity). In contrast, news reporting in the F. Corpus relied heavily on narratives of suspicion, conspiracy, and victimization. That is, evaluative terms in the F. Corpus emphasized distrust toward government figures, mainstream scientists, and public health policies, by relying on Judgment (Veracity and Propriety), to frame such figures as dishonest or unethical.

These patterns are in line with Wodak and Meyer’s (2009) argument that language is an instrument for ideological reproduction. In the case of Covid-19, linguistic choices were clearly used to convey competing ideologies, either promoting compliance and trust in public institutions or fostering resistance, fear, and skepticism. In both corpora, evaluative language not only expressed opinions but also helped influence public emotion and behavior.

Furthermore, the comparison between the two corpora provides evidence that the use of evaluative language in news reporting is systematically shaped by ideological positioning. For example, the contrasting representation of public figures such as Trump/Biden, Fauci, and the vaccinated/unvaccinated groups demonstrates how language can become a tool for both social cohesion and division. While the M. Corpus reinforced the importance of science-based policies through praise and trust in experts, the F. Corpus framed similar key figures as deceptive or morally corrupt, encouraging oppositional behavior.

The use of Attitude to produce “Us vs. Them” discourse was also an obvious pattern. In the M. Corpus, unvaccinated individuals were presented as ignorant or dangerous and often judged negatively in terms of Tenacity and Propriety. In contrast the F. Corpus framed vaccinated individuals as victims of an oppressive

health system, relying on the same sub-categories to frame government regulations as unethical or coercive.

In sum, this study has shown that corpus-based Appraisal analysis offers a powerful tool for uncovering the embedded ideologies in news discourse. Additionally, this research offers a significant methodological contribution by using a specialized corpus of over 4.6 million words. By analyzing a large corpus of Covid-19 news from Western mainstream and fake news sources, the study reveals systematic differences in how evaluative language was used to influence public opinion. While the mainstream corpus framed the pandemic as a global challenge that requires coordinated efforts and taking science-based measures, the fake news corpus framed it as evidence of institutional failure and moral corruption.

The study, thus, highlights the importance of media literacy. Since readers increasingly rely on online platforms for information, it has become essential to understand the difference between credible news sources and fake news sources. When readers recognize these ideologically motivated patterns of evaluation, this can help mitigate the risks of manipulation and misinformation, especially at times of crisis.

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