

# Shared concerns versus ideological preferences: The New York Times' coverage of two Olympics games held in the global health crisis

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## Abstract

The Olympic Games are often framed by the U.S. media as political events, with the media's preference for democratic political systems, while global health crises are often framed in a similar way, demonstrating shared concerns about human interests. When the Olympics occur during a global health crisis, a tension emerges between the ideological framing of the Olympics and the shared concern for human interests in media coverage. By analyzing New York Times coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, this study aims to show how ideological preferences in Olympic coverage interact with shared concerns about health crises. Furthermore, the analysis of this interaction leads to a rethinking of traditional journalistic norms that view journalists as detached observers.

## Keywords

news frame, framing, the New York Times, Olympics, COVID-19, Beijing, Tokyo

## Introduction

The Olympic Games are unique media events because they can attract the attention of millions of people worldwide and create a globally shared experience of the same ritual (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Although claimed to be an apolitical sporting gala that aims to celebrate some universal values such

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as fairness, openness, peace, and equality (Panagiotopoulou, 2009), the Olympic Games have been perceived as a political event where contestation between different ideologies takes place (Cornelissen, 2010; Tomlinson & Young, 2006). Host governments often use this international event as a public diplomacy initiative and soft power instrument to build a desired national image and increase international influence. In addition to sports-related issues, media coverage of the Olympics also associates the sporting event with ideological discourses that portray it as a political and ideological competition between different countries and regions (e.g., Boykoff, 2016; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2012). The U.S. media often have an ideological preference for countries with democratic political systems (e.g., Boykoff, 2022; Qing et al., 2010). The New York Times (henceforth NYT), for example, reported the Olympics in non-democratic countries, such as China and Russia, with negative ideological frames (Boykoff, 2022; Gao, 2010; P.-L. Pan & Lawal, 2017).

Unlike media coverage of the Olympics, media coverage of health crises does not display a strong ideological preference. Instead, the media often share some common concerns regardless of their political stance (Beaudoin, 2007; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Shih et al., 2008). Media reports of health crises used similar frames, such as “consequence frame” that emphasized the need to protect basic human interests (Beaudoin, 2007) and “collective action” frame that addressed the necessity of taking collective action (Bhatti et al., 2022).

Media coverage of health crises differs from that of the Olympics. If the Olympic Games were held during a global health crisis, such as the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, how would the media frame them? Would the news media lean towards framing the sporting conventions according to their political and ideological connotations, as in past Olympic coverage, or according to their shared concern for human interests, as in previous coverage of the global health crisis? What frames did the news media use in reporting these Olympics and how did they construct these frames? During a health crisis when people are frightened, disempowered, and may be hostile to learning about the pandemic, answering these questions can provide a better understanding of how the pandemic was framed and how people’s perception were shaped, which can help reduce the polarization of opinion and the spread of misinformation.

To answer these questions, this study gathered the New York Times’ reports of Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and analyzed the frames and framing devices used by the newspaper. The NYT, arguably “the most respected newspaper in the world” (Bennett, 2012), produces news reports that influence the international news selection of other mainstream U.S. media (Golan, 2006), the policies of U.S. bureaucracies (Van Belle, 2003), and millions of readers. Understanding how such an influential media outlet framed the COVID-19 Olympics can help understand public perceptions of other-related issues such as international politics and vaccines. Moreover, the NYT has been criticized for its liberal bias, while studies have also found that its international coverage offered broader perspectives than other mainstream American newspapers (Zelizer et al., 2002), making the NYT a great example for analyzing the tension between shared concerns of human interests and ideological preferences in covering the COVID-19 Olympics. Finally, the analysis leads to a discussion of traditional journalistic norms that view journalists as detached observers.

## **Framing COVID-19 Olympics: A political event or a health crisis**

There is a tension between the American media’s preference for democratic countries and the emphasis on common human interests when reporting the Olympic games during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. news media tend to frame the Olympics with an ideological stance in support of Western democracy (Boykoff, 2022; P.-L. Pan & Lawal, 2017). When host countries have non-democratic political systems, U.S. news media would focus their reports of the sporting event on its political connotations. For instance, U.S. media covered more political issues in their reports of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympic games, compared to media from Brazil, China, and UK (Qing et al., 2010). Specifically, the NYT paid particular attention to political issues such as U.S.-China conflicts, nationalist campaigns supported by the Chinese Communist Party, and political censorship (Gao, 2010). A recent study of U.S. media coverage of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics also found a significant emphasis on political concerns (Boykoff, 2022). Similar framing strategies can also be found in coverage of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, as the host country, Russia, also has a non-democratic political system and has long been perceived as a strong adversary of the U.S. in Europe (P.-L. Pan & Lawal, 2017), while an analysis of U.S. media coverage of the London 2012 Olympics found no such results (Hong and Oh, 2020).

However, when it comes to global health crises, media outlets tend to frame the pandemic in similar ways, emphasizing shared concerns regardless of their political stances and ideological preferences (Beaudoin, 2007; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Shih et al., 2008). This shared concern for human interests across media is what Daniel Hallin (1986) called the “sphere of consensus.” Although discussions of COVID-19 become politicized as political opponents utilized COVID-19 policies as political weapons to attack each other, we can still identify some agreements in the “sphere of consensus” such as the serious consequence and the need to take collective action (Bhatti et al., 2022). For instance, American news agencies agreed on the need to protect people’s lives regardless of their political and ideological stances (Green & Tyson, 2020; Hart et al., 2020). Therefore, when covering the Olympics during the pandemic, American media may also emphasize the need for effective control of the pandemic and sympathy for people’s losses, regardless of the political system and official ideology of the host countries. The tension between ideological preferences in news about the Olympics and shared concerns in news about health crises leads to the first research question:

**RQ1:** What frames did the NYT use in reporting the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

Existing studies also suggest a tension between how frames are constructed in news coverage of the Olympics and health crises. The frames in media coverage of the Olympics that favored democratic ideology were constructed differently. The ideological preference of the American media is expressed through the association of the sports convention with domestic politics such as protests and strikes, which negatively frames the Olympics in non-democratic societies (Gao, 2010). The ideological preference is also conveyed by American media’s excessive reports of human right issues in their coverage of the Beijing Olympics, which conforms to existing stereotypes of China as an authoritarian regime (Boykoff, 2022). Finally, the American media also placed the Olympics in the global context and expressed their preferences by describing the role of host countries in the international community. The international roles of the host countries that were in line with the western gaze, such as Japan and South Korea, were presented in a positive way in the news coverage (Collins, 2011).

However, shared concerns were expressed in similar ways in media coverage of health crises. For instance, different media used similar metaphors in their coverage of SARS, which shows a shared concern not to increase public anxiety about the disease (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). Studies have also found that the media tended to blame the government for its response to avian influenza, demonstrating their concern for the public interest (Choi & McKeever, 2019). Although most existing

studies on shared frames health crisis coverage has focused on comparing the themes used by different media (e.g., [Beaudoin, 2007](#); [Bhatti et al., 2022](#); [Luther & Zhou, 2005](#); [Shih et al., 2008](#)), the few studies that have examined how these frames were constructed suggest that they were constructed with similar framing devices, such as metaphors, and similar strategies such as blaming the government.

To conclude, the ideological preferences embedded in news coverage of the Olympics were expressed in different ways, but the shared concerns of human interests in news coverage of health crises were constructed in similar ways. This leads to the second research question:

**RQ2:** How did the NYT construct the frames used in its coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

## News frames, themes, and framing devices

A framing approach to analyzing news reports not only helps to explore how content is created, but also helps to understand the influential power of journalists to define the public narrative on a topic. This study focuses primarily on news production to address the research questions.

It is necessary to distinguish news frame from news framing because the first question is more related to news frames and the second question is more related to news framing. A news frame is often understood as a theme that organizes news stories around a central idea ([Linström, Marais, 2012](#)). According to Todd [Gitlin \(1980\)](#), frames in media reports are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion” (p. 7). News frames present social reality through particular themes in order to reduce the complexity of information and present social reality in organized ways. In news, a theme is an idea that helps to select certain aspects of the perceived reality and connect them into a coherent passage ([Z. Pan & Kosicki, 1993](#)). For instance, the studies cited above that examined how media outlets framed SARS ([Luther & Zhou, 2005](#)) and the COVID-19 pandemic ([Bhatti et al., 2022](#)) regarded news frames as themes that organize the articles and used news frame analysis to create typology of news themes.

Different from news frame—the themes that organize news reports, news framing is more about the process of news construction. As [Entman \(1993\)](#) has argued, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). The generalization of news frames often involves an analysis of the news framing process. Studies of U.S. media coverage of China have generalized frames according to the ideological positions expressed in the news reports, such as the “guardian of democracy frame” ([C.-C. Lee et al., 2001](#)) and the “human rights abuser frame” ([Stone & Xiao, 2007](#)). Both frames can be seen as products of an “ideological framing” process ([P.-L. Pan & Lawal, 2017](#)), because the media selected, explained, and evaluated Chinese issues based on their ideological preferences for Western democracy. A study of U.S. media coverage of Japan identified “cooperative frame” and “sympathetic frame” ([Park, 2003](#)). These frames are produced by what can be called diplomatic framing, which frames nations based on their diplomatic relations with the U.S. ([Yan & Kim, 2015](#)). Furthermore, U.S. media tended to emphasize the role of the political system when analyzing social issues in non-democratic countries, but did not generalize democracy when reporting social news in democratic countries (e.g., [Lueck et al., 2014](#)).

In this sense, the generalization of news frames (the themes of news reports) always involves the framing process (how the frames are generated). The analysis of news frames should include both news themes and the process of theme construction ([Linström, Marais, 2012](#)). Framing devices,

which often include keywords, catchphrases, metaphors, visual images, etc., can help to examine features of frames (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). By analyzing framing devices, researchers can see how news media construct the themes and meanings of news events for audiences. Furthermore, a framing device does not work alone, but frames the news events together with other framing devices (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). One type of framing device may not determine the major themes of the news, so scholars should pay attention to certain groups of devices and explore their interactions. In an analysis of how the NYT framed the Hong Kong handover, scholars identified four packages of news devices that helped us understand the news frame. Each package had its news themes, metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (C.-C. Lee et al., 2001). Notably, keywords are the most important framing devices because keywords are often key components of other framing devices such as metaphors, catch phrases and depictions. They can also showcase the organizing ideas of news frames. In the NYT's coverage of the Hong Kong handover, the term "democracy" was the name of an ideological package, its frame, exemplars, and depictions. Based on this, this study paid particular attention to key words in the analysis of framing devices.

## Research design

The researchers retrieved news coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics related to COVID-19 through the Article Search API provided by the NYT website. Articles containing the keywords "Olympic," "Covid," and "Tokyo" or "Olympic," "Covid," and "Beijing" were collected from two years before the Olympic opening ceremony to one month after the closing ceremony (Tokyo: from July 23, 2019 to September 8, 2021; Beijing: from February 4, 2020 to March 20, 2022). A manual clearing process was conducted to exclude news articles that only mentioned the Olympic Games or the pandemic. In practice, we excluded articles that contained less than one paragraph about Olympics or the pandemic. Of the 196 articles included in our analysis, 50 were about the Beijing Olympics, 141 were about the Tokyo Olympics and 5 were relevant to both. The considerably higher number of articles about the Tokyo Olympics is due to the fact that the Olympics were postponed by one year by the Japanese government due to the increasing number of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Qualitative content analysis was adopted to answer the first research question. Qualitative content analysis has been widely used to identify news frames of the Olympics (e.g., Jiang, 2013; Pan and Lawal, 2017). It is a direct way to examine the news frames used by the NYT in covering the two COVID-19 Olympics, thereby answering the first research question. Qualitative content analysis is different from quantitative content analysis that has been used by previous studies of media coverage of health crises in the way categories are generated and applied to the analysis. Quantitative content analysis is often deductive, designed to test hypotheses or address questions generated from theories or previous empirical research. In contrast, qualitative content analysis is mainly inductive, and grounded (Selvi, 2019). It allows researchers to particularly examine the news themes of the COVID-19 Olympics that are latent in the news text.

The two researchers conducted thematic coding on the news articles to generalize the news frames. The thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: we (1) read all the articles to familiarize ourselves with the content, (2) generated initial codes of themes, (3) searched for the themes in the acquired data, (4) reviewed the coding schemes, (5) defined and named the themes, and (6) finally wrote the report. To establish intercoder readability, 20 articles were randomly selected, and two coders coded the themes of the article. The agreement of the coded data was high ( $\kappa = 0.82$ ).

Discourse analysis was adopted to answer the second research question. Content analysis generalizes news themes that contribute to a general understanding of news content. Discourse analysis is an interpretive and critical method that aims to examine the way knowledge is produced through different rhetorical devices (Snape & Spencer, 2003), which can be used as a complement to content analysis in analyzing news coverage of the Olympics. It can help researchers analyze the framing devices such as the use of keywords, depictions of Olympic participants, and targets of criticism. Since keywords are the key framing devices, as mentioned above, the discourse analysis also utilized concordance statistics such as keyword frequency and keyword context—Key Word in Context (KWIC)—to examine the use of keywords in the NYT stories.

The discourse analysis involved a two-step process. First, the two researchers went through all the news articles with the coding result and keyword frequency to examine how the NYC constructed the frames. Each researcher generalized several strategies and held a meeting to discuss their findings. The discussions led to agreements on certain strategies. The two researchers then went back to the news reports to double check the strategies they both agreed on and to reevaluate the strategies they did not agree on. Finally, the researchers had a meeting to finalize their findings.

## Results of qualitative content analysis: Same news frames

The qualitative content analysis showed that the news coverage of the two COVID-19 Olympics used the same frames—the negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy and the suffering of Olympic participants (see Table 1), which answered the first research question. “Negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy” focused on the negative impacts of the COVID-19 policies implemented by governments, Olympic committees, and other institutions to ensure that the sports convention could be held on time. “Suffering of Olympic participants” told news stories about the challenges and hardship for the athletes and spectators to attend the sports convention. “Comprehensive report” referred to news articles that introduced the overall situation of the host city and the Olympic Games without any special emphasis while “Others” included articles that paid attention to the commercial aspects of the Olympics or the personal experiences of journalists. All news articles that used the first frame also used an unfavorable tone to show their criticism of the COVID-19 policies, while all articles that used the second frame used a favorable tone to display their sympathy for the suffering of the participants. We used terms such as “negative” and “sufferings” to demonstrate the tone of each frame. The first frame is consistent with previous studies of media coverage of health crises that emphasize the consequences of the pandemic (e.g., Bhatti et al., 2022; Luther & Zhou, 2005). The second frame is similar to previous studies of media coverage of the Olympics that pay particular attention to athletes (e.g., Jiang, 2013). The novel finding is that these frames displayed a consistent

**Table 1.** Frames of the two Olympic games.

Frame	Tokyo	Beijing
	N (%)	N (%)
Negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy	66 (46.8)	22 (44.0)
Suffering of Olympic participants	53 (37.5)	19 (38.0)
Comprehensive report	7 (5.0)	8 (16.0)
Others	15 (10.6)	1 (2.0)

negative attitude toward the consequences of government policies and a sympathetic attitude toward individual suffering.

The researchers also used R to determine the frequency of keywords used in reports of the two COVID-19 Olympics (see Figure 1). “I.O.C” (International Olympic Committee) was the most frequently used term in news articles about the Tokyo Olympics, more frequently than “minister” and “Abe,” while “Xi” was the most frequently used term in coverage of the Beijing Olympics. The most frequently used terms also suggested the same news frame—negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy. The statistics also helped to analyze the framing devices, as shown below.

The negative outcome of the COVID-19 policy is one of the news frames used by news coverage of the two COVID-19 Olympics. The NYT reported on the policies of the Olympic organizers in Japan and China, such as crowd control measures (e.g., July 29, 2021; February 2, 2022), and non-Olympic policies, such as the campaign to increase vaccination in Tokyo (e.g., August 3, 2021) and the zero-COVID policy in Beijing (e.g., February 4, 2022). Notably, the NYT criticized the policies of both the Japanese and Chinese organizers. The newspaper did not cover the Tokyo Olympics more favorably than the Beijing Olympics, even though the zero-COVID policy was criticized for being stricter than that of most countries around the world. This suggests that in organizing its coverage, the NYT focused more on common concerns, such as concern for human life, than on the ideological positions of the host nations.

The second news frame is the suffering of Olympic participants. This frame focused on the suffering of athletes and local residents caused by the pandemic and government policies. For instance, the NYT reported stories of athletes who were prevented from participating in qualifying events due to quarantine or travel restrictions during the pandemic (e.g., June 20, 2021; February 5, 2022); athletes who tested positive during the Olympics were forced to quit the competitions (e.g., July 25, 2021; February 3, 2022); and local residents whose lives were affected by the Olympics because their activities were restricted and they were not allowed to watch the competitions inside

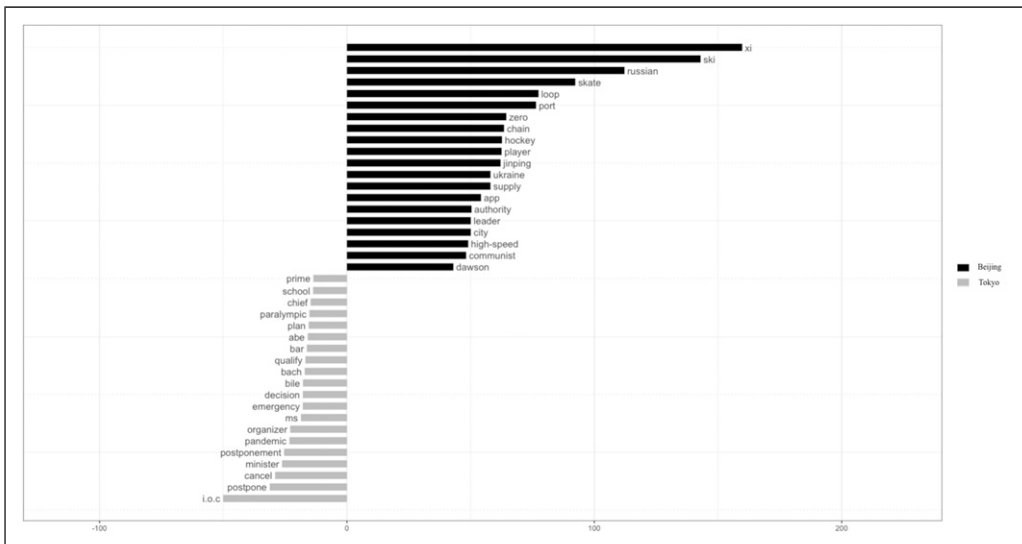


Figure 1. Frequency of keywords used in news reports.

the stadium (e.g., June 4, 2021; January 12, 2022). The “suffering of Olympic participants” frame showed sympathy for individual suffering in the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Chinese government implemented a much stricter regulation—zero-COVID policy—the stories of individual athletes in both Olympics addressed people’s suffering, which reflected the common concerns of human interests in covering worldwide health crises.

### **Results of discourse analysis: Different framing strategies**

The discourse analysis showed that the NYT constructed the frames differently in its coverage of the Tokyo and Beijing Olympics. First, the “negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy” was constructed in different ways. In reporting on the Tokyo Olympics, the NYT blamed the I.O.C. more than the Japanese government, and rarely mentioned the influence of the Japanese democratic system on the COVID-19 policy. However, when covering the Beijing Olympics, the NYT mainly criticized the Chinese government and addressed the influence of its non-democratic system on Beijing’s COVID-19 policies. Second, the news source was different in framing “suffering of Olympic participants.” The NYT presented personal opinions of Japanese individuals in its coverage of the Tokyo Olympics, but offered only general descriptions of the Chinese public without interviewing Chinese audiences in its coverage of the Beijing Olympics. The differences in framing strategies demonstrate the ideological preferences of the U.S. media for democracy.

#### *Different targets to blame: I.O.C and government*

There are two differences in the framing of the negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy. The first is that the NYT criticized different institutions. The NYT blamed the I.O.C. more than the Japanese government in the Tokyo case while it focused its criticism on the Chinese government in the Beijing case. According to the NYT, the I.O.C. should be blamed for insisting on holding the Tokyo Olympics despite rising coronavirus cases, inadequate vaccinations, and other risk factors that could worsen the health crisis. An article entitled “Why are the Olympics still happening? These numbers explain it” (June 21, 2021) is a representative case to show the different attitudes towards the I.O.C and the Japanese government. The article first calculated the financial and reputational loss to Japan due to the reduced Olympic audience, arguing that the “reputational damage to Japan” is “incalculable.” Then the article calculated the financial benefits of the I.O.C. if the Olympic games were still held after a one-year postponement. For instance, it emphasized that television broadcasting right “accounts for 73% of the I.O.C.’s revenue,” suggesting that the I.O.C. insisted on holding the Olympics as the Omicron wave traveled around the world. Hosting the Olympics can also bring financial benefits to the Japanese government, such as the increase in tax revenue due to increased trade activities, but most of the paragraphs calculated the financial gain of the I.O.C. Only in the last paragraph did the article mention the Japanese government, arguing that the Prime Minister might see an increase in his popularity rating. The article suggested that since the I.O.C. could acquire a lot of financial benefits from holding the Olympics, it should be blamed for the negative outcomes caused by holding such a sports convention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The criticism of the I.O.C. is common in the NYT’s coverage of the Tokyo Olympics, and some of them expressed the criticism in a more direct way. For instance, one article also discussed the possible postponement and cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics, arguing that the I.O.C. has long been obsessed with staging events regardless of negative factors. It wrote: “[t]he I.O.C. has a history of pressing through a catastrophe to stage the Games, adopting the mantra ‘the Games must go on’.” (March 18, 2020).



On the contrary, most of the coverage of the Beijing Olympics criticized the Chinese government. Most of the criticism was directed at Xi Jinping and the Beijing government, rather than the I.O.C. For instance, a lengthy article entitled “China’s Games: How China’s Xi Jinping is staging the Beijing Olympics on his terms” (January 22, 2022) linked the Olympics to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party which would elect a new general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The article argued that a successful Olympic Game would become a solid springboard for Xi to be re-elected the general secretary and president. Xi was portrayed as a powerful political leader who was desperate to host the Olympics, and it was believed that the Xi Jinping government was trying to eliminate opposition by any means. As the article wrote:

“Mr. Xi’s government has brushed off criticism from human rights activists and world leaders as the bias of those—including President Biden—who would keep China down. It has implicitly warned Olympic broadcasters and sponsors not to bend to calls for protests or boycotts over the country’s political crackdown in Hong Kong or its campaign of repression in Xinjiang, the largely Muslim region in the northwest.”

Instead of the possible increase in COVID-19 cases and the economic impact, the article focused on the political consequence of holding the Games—leading to a more authoritarian political system under a strong leader. In fact, the negative consequence of holding a COVID-19 Olympics has nothing to do with the pandemic in the article.

Moreover, the I.O.C. was hardly criticized in the reports of the Beijing Olympics. In the NYT’s coverage of the Tokyo Olympics, the I.O.C. was portrayed as the most active actor in insisting on holding the Olympics for financial gain, and was criticized for not considering public opinion. In the case of Beijing, there are only two articles criticizing the I.O.C. Even when the I.O.C. was criticized, the articles portrayed the I.O.C. as an accomplice of the powerful Chinese government instead of an active pursuer of financial benefits. For instance, the article cited above argued that “[t]he I.O.C., like international corporations and entire countries, has become so dependent on China and its huge market that few can, or dare to, speak up against the direction Mr. Xi is taking the country” (January 22, 2022). The criticism of the I.O.C. is utilized to address that Xi was taking the country. The emphasis on politics that is not directly associated with the sports convention, as argued by previous studies, demonstrates the ideological preferences of the NYT and U.S. media in general (Boykoff, 2022; Gao, 2010). In addition, the comparison found that the strong criticism of the Chinese government and the relatively loose criticism of the Japanese government also reflect the NYT’s preference for countries with democratic political systems in framing foreign news.

### *Criticism due to different reasons: Disregarding public opinion and political regime*

The second difference in framing the “negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy” is that the NYT gave different reasons when criticizing the host governments. The Japanese government was denounced for disregarding public opinion, while the Chinese government was denounced for being an authoritarian regime. This difference also reflected the ideological preferences of the NYT.

The NYT mentioned the problems of Japanese politicians in its criticism of the Tokyo Olympics, but it did not point out the problems of the democratic political system. There is one article that strongly criticized the Japanese government. It criticized Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for not spending enough time with other officials on dealing with health issues and Environment Minister Shinjiro Loizumi for skipping a meeting on the pandemic to attend a New Years’ party. In the end, the article concluded that the political leaders in the Japanese government are “hereditary politicians” and the Japanese government is “a privileged club of hereditary politicians and their opportunistic sycophants, and a comforting echo chamber. Japan’s leaders are so out of touch with

the lives of ordinary people that they seem genuinely uninterested in their plight” (February 26, 2020). While this article criticized Japanese politicians, it did not ascribe such problems to the Japanese democratic system whose nepotism can be traced back to the establishment of Japan’s political system during the American Occupation (Dower, 1999). In other words, the problem pointed out in the article is rooted in the establishment of Japan’s democratic political system.

On the contrary, in the case of Beijing, the NYT always linked the Olympics to the authoritarian system and arbitrary government. For instance, the article entitled “2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: Answers to Some Big Questions” (January 4, 2022) portrayed the Chinese government as an authoritarian regime who would like to compete with other democratic systems to show the superiority of the authoritarian system. In this competition, “China’s record on human rights, including its mistreatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the suppression of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, has led activists around the world to call for countries and sponsors to boycott the Beijing Games.” The title of this article suggests that it focuses on “big questions” of Beijing Olympics, and the passage shows that most of these big problems are political issues not directly related to sports.

The Key Word In Context (KWIC) also found that the NYT tended to associate non-Olympics issues, such as the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, suppressions of Hong Kong protests, the disappearance of Peng Shuai, and international politics such as the rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine, with the Beijing Olympics. Figure 2 shows how the NYT described Xi as using the Olympics to maintain control and mentioned his relationship with Russian President Putin.

Relating the sports convention to other political and social issues is what Iyengar (1990) called a “thematic” frame. Compared with an “episodic” frame which focuses on individual cases, a “thematic” frame is a generic framing strategies that places news cases in the general social context and therefore makes the audience more likely to believe that the government should take more responsibility for social problems. In this case, framing the Olympics with “thematic” frame would lead to more criticism of the Beijing government. This generic framing strategy has been used by the U.S. media in reports of disasters and health crises in non-democratic countries (e.g., Keshishian, 1997; Luther & Zhou, 2005). The generic framing strategy can associate news events with authoritarian political systems without in-depth analysis of the specific cases, thereby reinforcing existing political stereotypes.

### Sufferings of Olympics participants

The NYT also constructed the “suffering of Olympic participants” in different ways. The major difference between reports of the two Olympic Games was the news source. In covering the Tokyo Olympics, the NYT vividly showed how Japanese residents perceived the health risks and other

[text2, 82]	ever attempted at an Olympic Games. China's leader, Xi Jinping, has made it his goal to
[text3, 116]	looked at the significance of the games for Xi Jinping, China's authoritarian leader.
[text3, 128]	authoritarian leader. [China's Games: How Xi Jinping Is Staging the Olympics on His Terms
[text3, 172]	more confident nation under Mr. Xi, the country's most powerful leader since Mao
[text3, 594]	television rights fees that will allow Mr. Xi to highlight his version of China.
[text3, 938]	would lead the nation to prosperity. But Xi Jinping, the country's leader, seems now
[text15, 576]	Communist Party might. The country's leader, Xi Jinping, attended the closing, as he
[text15, 686]	China also injected its own political elements. Mr. Xi met the Russian president, Vladimir V.
[text15, 1197]	would lead the nation to prosperity. But Xi Jinping, the country's leader, seems now
[text17, 1448]	the ruling Communist Party and its leader, Xi Jinping.” The Olympics is either an

Figure 2. Keyword “Xi” in context.

impacts brought by the Olympics Games and government regulations through the lens of local residents. By comparison, its coverage of the Beijing Olympics included only some general descriptions of Chinese residents. The different ways of reporting on local residents showed how the newspaper's ideological preference for countries with democratic political systems shaped the construction of news frames.

In reports of Japanese residents, the NYT interviewed people from different walks of lives and showed their different experiences and opinions about holding the COVID-19 Olympics. In addition to people's concerns about the high death rate of COVID-19 and the relatively low vaccination rate in Japan, the NYT covered stories of people whose lives were affected. For example, one story focused on a Japanese restaurant owner whose business was severely impacted not only by the pandemic but also by the government's policy of prohibiting athletes from eating outside the "Olympic bubbles." Although the owner felt happy for the country, he expressed his personal opposition to the Olympics. He said that "my honest feeling when thinking about the world is that the Olympics should stop" (June 4, 2021). In another story, a father expressed his concern about the pandemic and his joy about the Olympics. He concluded his opinion as "battling two emotions" (August 8, 2021). Apart from mixed feelings about the Olympics, the NYT also showed the Japanese people's passion for sports and their warm welcome to athletes from other countries. In one article, the NYT interviewed two big Olympics fans who expressed their excitement about the upcoming sports gala and their pity because they "can't go to the Olympics in our own city due to the COVID-19" (August 9, 2021). These stories displayed the different reactions of individual Japanese people to the Olympics by quoting their own words.

The voices of Chinese individuals were missing from the NYT news reports. Chinese residents were depicted as a mass. No individual voice was included in the news reports. The Chinese government enforced a strict zero-COVID policy in several cities, resulting in lock-downs that lasted for months. The lives of Chinese residents were greatly affected, but Chinese people were portrayed only as a group of people suffering from the COVID-19 policy, and no Chinese residents were interviewed by the NYT journalists. For example, one report described how local citizens were forced to stay at home when some cases were found in their buildings and how citizens who were not in close contact with infected people were also required to refrain from "unnecessary travel to the capital." (January 12, 2022). Admittedly, one reason for the invisibility of Chinese people in American media coverage was the limited access of foreign media to Chinese residents. This was due to the Chinese government's tight grip on foreign journalists in China, as well as rising nationalist sentiment against foreign journalists who were perceived as speaking ill of China. Previous studies have shown that the NYT's negative portray of China can be explained by the news source, as news sources are difficult to find in China and the few sources willing to accept interviews may agree with the newspaper's political and ideological stance (Peng, 2004). Nevertheless, the NYT's dismissal of the Chinese people's mixed responses to the COVID-19 policy allowed the newspaper to portray the Chinese public as a group suffering from authoritarian control, thus reinforcing political stereotypes of China.

## Conclusion and discussion

This study analyzed how the NYT framed the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Olympics. The analysis showed that the media coverage of the two Olympics used the same news frames—negative outcomes of the COVID-19 policy and suffering of Olympic participants—but constructed these frames in different ways. Using the same news frames to cover the COVID-19 Olympics showed that the NYT emphasized common concerns of human interests while ideological

preferences for nations with democratic systems still played an important role in frame construction. The differences in frame construction reflected the long-standing ideological preference for democracy in the U.S. media.

The analysis leads us to rethink traditional journalistic norms that portray journalists as detached observers. Both frames used by the NYT in its coverage of the COVID-19 Olympics are negative in content and tone. These negative frames are indicative of a long-standing negative bias in news reporting that tends to view conflicts and problems as having high news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This negative bias results in the traditional view of journalism that regards journalists as detached observers and watchdogs whose job is to expose problems for the public good (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). In recent years, this view has been challenged by more engaging and participatory ways of reporting the news, such as constructive journalism, citizen journalism and others. There is a growing desire in journalism to transform the emphasis on conflicts and problems that can shock and frighten the audience into a more active role of journalism in alleviating tensions and solving problems (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). The results of this study tend to support such a shift in journalist norms, as requiring journalists to be detached observers results in reports that focus on the conflicts and problems of the pandemic. When people are frightened, disempowered, and may be hostile to learning about the pandemic, reporting with such a negative bias is not helpful to the public in overcoming the health crisis.

This study does not suggest a complete abandonment of traditional journalistic norms. That is, far beyond the scope of such an empirical study. The negative bias leads to another issue: the role of national boundaries in the journalistic pursuit of the public good. The reason for making journalists detached observers is to enable them to report objectively and stimulate public reflection on social issues, thereby realizing the public good (Bro, 2019). The public is often assumed to be the national communities to which news viewers belong. This assumption leads to a difference in the way domestic and international news is presented. International news reporting, especially of ideological others, is more likely to follow the stereotypes held by the public. The NYT is widely recognized as a pioneer in pursuing the public good through traditional and new journalistic practices. Its ideological preference in international news also follows the stereotypes of the American public. It shows that how to define and pursue the "good" outside the public, often recognized as a national community, is a problem that deserves further exploration.

The analysis also demonstrates the strengths of different methods in examining the political standpoint of media. The shared concerns were identified through content analysis while the different framing strategies that demonstrated the NYT's ideological preferences were identified through discourse analysis. Arguably, quantitative methods are helpful in identifying common themes, while qualitative methods may be more beneficial in analyzing how news frames are constructed. Existing quantitative studies of shared frames in reports of health crises and other issues in the "sphere of consensus" may ignore the ideological preferences hidden in framing strategies.

This study also has limitations. The perceptions of journalists and editors also play an important role in the framing process. Their understanding of the reported events, and their perceived audience perception of the events would influence how they frame the events, which goes beyond what content analysis and discourse analysis can do. Therefore, further studies should conduct interviews or newsroom ethnography to acquire information about how journalists and editors perceive the news events and how this might influence news frames.

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**Appendix I.** Cited newsreports of NYT.

Title	Type	Date
Japan Can't Handle the Coronavirus. Can It Host the Olympics?	Reporting	2020/2/ 26
Cancel. The. Olympics	Commentary	2020/3/ 18
Eat, Sleep, Play: First Team to Arrive in Japan Finds a Constricted Olympics	Reporting	2021/6/4
The Pandemic Has Some of the Best Boxers Watching the Olympics From Afar	Reporting	2021/6/ 20
Why Are the Olympics Still Happening? These Numbers Explain It	Reporting	2021/6/ 21
Bryson DeChambeau and Jon Rahm drop out of golf after testing positive	Reporting	2021/7/ 25
As Covid Cases Hit Record High in Tokyo, Can the Olympic Bubble Hold?	Reporting	2021/7/ 29
Japan tries a new tactic as virus surges: Public shaming	Reporting	2021/8/3
Olympics End as They Began: Strangely	Reporting	2021/8/8
Covering a Weird Olympics	Commentary	2021/8/9
2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: Answers to Some Big Questions	Reporting	2022/1/4
Omicron Deepens Uncertainty Surrounding Beijing Olympics	Reporting	2022/1/ 12
China's Games: How China's Xi Jinping is staging the Beijing Olympics on his terms	Reporting	2022/1/ 22
Inside Beijing's Olympic Bubble: Robots, Swabs and a Big Gamble	Reporter's note	2022/2/2
The coronavirus continues to sideline Olympic athletes as they gear up for competition	Reporting	2022/2/3
Zero Covid in China	Reporting	2022/2/4
A U.S. speedskater, kept at home by Covid tests, hopes to make it to Beijing	Reporting	2022/2/5