Cross-National News Coverage of Government Response to COVID-19: Community Structure Theory and "Buffered" Health Access (Especially for Women)

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Introduction

- A growing divide exists among those who desire COVID-19 pandemic responses to primarily be government responsibility versus societal responsibility.
  - "Government responsibility": holds national government authorities primarily responsible for ensuring preventive measures for COVID-19 are taken.
  - "Societal responsibility": suggests that individuals, organizations, non-profits, and domestic/international nongovernmental organizations, are primarily responsible for COVID-19 preventive measures.
- A literature review on coverage of state and local government responses to COVID-19 yielded few communication studies results.

Community Structure Theory

- Connecting community demographics to content analysis of variations in media coverage of critical issues, the theory assumes that society sets media agendas (Pollock, 2007, 2013, 2015).

Research Questions

1. How much variation is there in cross-national coverage of government responses to COVID-19?
2. How closely linked is that coverage variation to differences in national demographics?

Hypotheses

- *Buffer*: Privileged communities with advantaged women, health care access, and education are linked to coverage supporting human rights claims.
- *Vulnerability*: Vulnerable populations are associated with media supporting human rights claims.
- *Stakeholder*: Greater proportions of stakeholders can be linked to more media support for human rights claims.

Methodology

- 25 major newspapers, 471 total relevant articles coded
- Sample period: September 15th, 2020 – October 15th, 2020. **Start:** Several U.S. states lifted travel restrictions **End:** The date of the second scheduled presidential debate
- Content direction was coded as government responsibility, society responsibility, or balanced/neutral.
- Scott's Pi Coefficient of Intercoder Reliability: 0.8817

Statistical Analysis: Introducing Pollock's Media Vector

- Media Vectors combine measures of article "prominence" and "direction" into a single composite score.
- Pearson correlations and regression analysis compare national demographics with Media Vectors.

MAJOR FINDING:

Overall, midwives per 100,000, physicians per 100,000, and female life expectancy, all measuring *privileged/"buffered" healthcare access*, appear strongly associated (57.0% of the variance) with media coverage emphasizing government responsibility for COVID-19.

SECONDARY FINDING:

Other indicators of *privileged/"buffered" healthcare access* are significantly associated with media emphasis on "more" government responsibility: hospital beds per 100,000 and male life expectancy. Indicators of *privileged/"buffered" education access* are also linked to coverage emphasizing "more" government responsibility, including: literacy rate, female literacy rate and percent females in secondary school.

TERTIARY FINDING:

Vulnerability indicators are strongly associated with media emphasis on *"less" government responsibility*: percent permanent crop land; percent agricultural land; percent younger than 15; infant mortality; fertility rate; value added to GDP from agriculture; and percent undernourished. These findings disconfirm the vulnerability hypothesis.

Media Vector Scores

Country	Newspaper	Media Vector
Russia	*Moscow Times*	1.000
Canada	*The Toronto Star*	.8178
Australia	*The Sydney Morning Herald*	.7496
Germany	*Deutsche-Presse Agentur*	.6290
Kenya	*Daily Nation*	.6253
Japan	*The Japan Times*	.5881
France	*Agence France-Presse*	.5765
United States	*The New York Times*	.5589
Egypt	*Daily News Egypt*	.5335
Chile	*El Mercurio*	.5328
China	*The China Daily*	.4830
Namibia	*The Namibian*	.4434
India	*Times of India*	.3760
United Kingdom	*Times of London*	.3458
Zimbabwe	*The Herald*	.3228
Ethiopia	*Ethiopian Herald*	.2178
Nigeria	*This Day*	.1884
Argentina	*La Nación*	.1651
Ghana	*The Herald*	.1169
Pakistan	*The Nation*	.0810
Uganda	*New Vision*	.0687
South Africa	*The Star*	.0647
Rwanda	*The New Times*	.0254
Malaysia	*New Straits Times*	.0236
Thailand	*Bangkok Post*	-.0441

Significant Pearson Correlations

Country Characteristic	Pearson Correlation	Significance	Hypothesis Category
Midwives per 100,000	.649	.000**	HP
Broadband Subscriptions per 100 People in a Nation	.605	.001**	V
GDP per Capita	.572	.001**	V
Physicians per 100,000	.585	.001**	HP
Percentage of Permanent Crop Land in a Nation	-.554	.002**	V
Percent Agricultural Land in a Nation	-.554	.002**	V
Female Life Expectancy at Birth	.522	.004**	HP

Key: V = vulnerability, HP = health privilege

Regression Analysis

Model	R	R^2 Cumulative	R^2 Change	F Change	Significant F Change
Midwives	0.664	0.415	0.441	17.323	0.000
Midwives, PPC	0.743	0.552	0.111	5.223	0.033
Midwives, PPC, PD	0.779	0.607	0.055	2.825	0.108
Midwives, PPC, PD, FLE	0.823	0.677	0.070	4.125	0.056

Key: PPC = Percent Permanent Cropland, PD = Physician Density, FLE = Female Life Expectancy

Pollock, J.C. (2007). *Tilted mirrors: Media alignment with political and social change – a community structure approach.* Cresskill, NU: Hampton Press.