

## The News Media Exposure and Polarization of Public Opinion: The Limits of Social Functions of the Agenda-setting Role of Mass Media

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to investigate whether the increased news media use corresponds to consensus or polarization of public opinion among the divergent demographic subgroups regarding the attributes of the health issue. The study, with its cross-sectional design, includes a content analysis of news media, coupled with a purposive survey of respondents residing in Beijing. The major findings of the study were that increased news media exposure corresponded to the polarization of public opinion on the attributes of health issue. Specifically, the more demographic subgroups used the news media, the more they disagreed in relation to their opinion about health problems. The hypothesis regarding the increased news media use and corresponding consensus in the society was not supported. In contrast, this study found that increased exposure to the news media corresponded to the polarization of public opinion on the attributes of health issues. The study offers some interesting findings regarding the role news media play in contemporary society. The polarization caused by the news media has societal implications. The public consensus on important social issues and collective action for societal well-being are on the decline, and individualized agendas are on increase. The findings of this study are useful in understanding the role of the news media in defining the attributes of a health issue. This paper can be used as an exploratory study regarding the role of news media in a socialist state-owned media country.*

**Keywords:** News media, consensus, fragmentation, attributes of health issue, sub-issue, agenda-setting, society.

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## Introduction

With the rapid diffusion of new technologies, the contemporary news media environment has become increasingly diverse in nature, both in quantity and quality. This diversification gave rise to a serious debate vis-à-vis common agendas of the public and the role of media in achieving social consensus within societies regarding issues, and attributes. We are living in a mediated world where reality is framed and shaped by media (Ji, Hu & Muhammad, 2016). There are two competing hypotheses suggesting opposing prophecies regarding the role of news media in this diversified environment. One school contends that despite diversification in media outlets, the agenda presented by news media to the public are still highly redundant. As a result, the media act like magnets and develop social consensus among the public regarding important issues and attributes in society. Put simply, a number of studies indicate that exposure to news media corresponds to an increased consensus on issues, objects, and attributes among different segments of a populace. As a consequence, the news media unite scattered individuals in a shared experience and develop collective consciousness, thus, achieving consensus among diversified segments of the society regarding issues, objects, and attributes (Chinag, 1995; Higgins, 2009; Lasswell, 1948; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998b; McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2014; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1976; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; McQuail, 1987; Mikami, Takeshita, Nakada, & Kawabata, 1995; Shaw & Martin, 1992; Yousaf, 2018a, 2018b; Yousaf & Hu, in press).

The second school posits that diversification corresponds to the fragmentation of public opinion, thus, declining the media power to define common public agendas. Research into this line indicates that exposure to certain attributes (including frames) corresponds to the fragmentation of public opinion regarding issues, objects, and attributes. They hypothesize that fragmentation is caused either by partisan media or selective exposure (Garrett et al., 2014; Mutz, 2006; Smith & Searles, 2013; Stroud, 2010), or media's presentation of issues, objects, and attributes (Gamson, 1992; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). This study, therefore, is an attempt to investigate whether increased exposure to news media corresponds to increased consensus or fragmentation of public opinion regarding attributes of a health issue.

### *News Media exposure and Consensus*

Ours is an age of exaggerated individual differences. For instance, in Beijing, it is the environmentalists versus developers- the former campaign for an environment free of pollution and the latter advocate for development. The newspaper dailies are filled with the news of conflict. However, the news media role is not only limited to the conflict in society. News media play another important role in the community-the social conscious role. The public issues have to compete to rise up to the media agenda and public agenda. At any time, there are many issues competing for public attention but

is not possible for any society and its institutions to attend more than a few issues (McCombs, 2004). However, Miller (1956) termed it as a “magic number seven plus or minus two” long ago. He reported that the public could only attend to a limited number of issues at any given time. These issues usually can range from five-seven at the point in time. Similarly, the media cannot entertain all the issues at the same time.

The space in the newspapers and time in the television channels is very limited and dozens of issues contend for climbing at the top of the agenda. When media give more coverage to some issues at the cost of others, they become salient in media and, consequently, their relative salience in the public agenda also increases. This prioritization and selection of issues influence public opinion about these issues. Thus, the public thinks these issues as important as they are presented in the news media. In this way, news media play an important role in developing consensus on issues confronting society among various demographic subgroups by minimizing individual differences (McCombs, 1997). Therefore, the greater the exposure of the public to media the greater the consensus among them on the key issues faced by society regardless of their demographic features like gender, age, education, and political affiliation.

Shaw and Martin (1992) found that exposure to news media results in consensus among the different demographic subgroups on important issues within the community. Their findings indicated that when individuals increased their news media exposure, the level of agreement among them on the important issues increased regardless of their gender, age, and other demographic variables. In another study, Chinag (1995) replicated the consensus-building study of Shah and Martin in a different setting (Taiwan). In her study, the sample was divided into gender, education, income, and geographical groups, excluding the age and race of the pioneer study. Her findings supported the hypothesis that increased exposure to news media, in this case, television, results in increased consensus among different demographic subgroups on the important issues within a community. Both Shaw and Martin (1992), and Chiang (1995) studies examined the consensus-building role of news media at the first level of agenda-setting.

Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, and McCombs (1998a) investigated the news media consensus-building role at the first and second level of agenda-setting regarding political issues in Spain. The sample in this study was categorized into gender, age, education, and ideology. At first level, they found that the salience of the issues in the media agenda corresponded to the salience of issues in the public agenda. At the second level, they found that the salience of the attributes of the issues in the media also corresponded to the salience of the attributes in the public agenda. In sum, it is concluded that news media not only tells readers and viewers what to think about but also how to think. Out of 24 comparisons, 17 supported that increased exposure to news media corresponded to the increased consensus among the different demographic subgroups on the agenda of issues and agenda of attributes of the candidates. Taking into consideration the role of transnational media, Higgins (2009) found that the more exposure to national and transnational media corresponded to

the more agreement on the attributes of 9-11 attacks and community attributes among different social groups. This study found stronger support for increased news media exposure and corresponding consensus on the substantive dimension compared to the affective dimension.

In a recent study, Yousaf (2018a) found that increased news media exposure corresponded to increased consensus among diverse segments of a populace. At the first level, out of the 10 comparisons conducted, only 3 supported the proposition. At the second level, of 80 comparisons, 44 supported that increased news media exposure corresponds to an increased consensus on the substantive and affective dimensions. Taking into consideration the substantive and affective dimension, evidence was stronger at the substantive dimension compared to the affective dimension. The attributes of China were excluded from the analysis because China was evaluated favorably by the surveyed sample (290 out of 304). Yousaf (2018b) investigated the role of news media in consensus building at the first level and second level of agenda-setting. He found that increased news media usage corresponded to increased consensus among different demographic groups of society regarding the issue of terrorism and the attributes of terrorism. Of the 10 comparisons he conducted, 3 supported the consensus-building role of news media at the first level; whereas 8 out of 10 comparisons supported the consensus-building role of news media at the second level of agenda-setting. Thus, the support was stronger at the second level compared to the first level of agenda-setting.

#### ***News media exposure and polarization***

The fragmentation thesis rests on two main lines of research: exposure to partisan media and selective exposure. This line of research has found a correspondence between news exposure and polarization (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Jomini Stroud, 2007; Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, news media exposure and corresponding polarization are inconclusive in nature. Some scholars have investigated a specific genre exposure and resulting polarization such as watching a file and its impact on polarization (Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981; Lavine, Borgida, & Sullivan, 2000), newspaper exposure and corresponding polarization (Druckman & Parkin, 2005), and websites exposure and opinion polarization (Bimber & Davis, 2003). As a result, this fragmentation inhibits the public from sharing a common experience and understanding of one another. As a result, common culture and identity are fading away (Neuman, 1991, p. 67). This fragmentation process, stimulated by the rapid diffusion of technologies in society, has posed a threat to the role of mass media in contemporary society. This fragmentation is a serious threat to core mass communication theories such as cultivation analysis, agenda-setting, and critical theories (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 374). They explicate that all these theories are based on central media with a homogeneous and redundant agenda.

#### ***The focal point of Chinese health communication literature***

Yu & Lu (2011) analyzed the sample of 412 research papers from different journals on health communication during the period of 1999-2009.

Their findings revealed that health communication during this period was practical-oriented; focused on information about different diseases, attitudes, and behaviors of the patients about the information and AIDS-related research and preventative measures. It was revealed that the reviewed researches had used methods like content analysis, control experiments, case studies, document analysis, and focus groups. In another study of the same kind, Yan & Li (2015) summarized the existing health literature in China and found that domestic literature has been very exploratory in nature and is confined to a description of the phenomenon and trends of communication. They concluded that researchers did explore how the relevant media content and other social factors affect the public's health cognition and behavior. However, they identified a gap between media content and its influence on public cognitions regarding health issues in the existing literature. In a similar vein, Zhang (2005) reviewed the health literature and found nine different directions of health communication conducted in China. These categories included effects on health communication, the doctor-patient relationship, health education, and research, history of health communication, cultural factors, etc.

In contrast, Ye & Lu (2016) reviewed health education-related literature for a period of six years. They concluded that Chinese health communication literature is still at the formative stage, and its main focus has been on disease prevention and control, health work, and lexical attributes mostly in the field of public health, guided by health education and the practice of disease control and prevention. They have disclosed that there are fewer studies exploring the role of media in health communication. In contrast, Hubbell & Dearing (2003) observed the advocacy role of local media regarding community health issues. Their findings suggested that local newspapers sometimes play a role in conferring the status of health issues which become important for the public. As a result, the local newspapers play an essential role in highlighting the health issues faced by the communities. The Chinese health system is one of the most diverse and dynamic systems in the world today. As an outcome of the interplay between the socialist low-cost public service tradition and the uneven development regarding reforms in China since 1978, the Chinese health system provides health facilities to over 1.34 billion people ("The Sixth National Census Data", 2011). Notably, it is under transition owing to the rapid transformation which Chinese society witnessed in the last few years. Despite the unevenness of the national allocation of medical resources, mostly concentrated in urban areas and big cities, its transformation, and the transition are aimed to provide better medical facilities to every Chinese. The Chinese health system is showing significant improvement with every passing year. As a report indicated "Over the past years, the Chinese people's social security, medical, social assistance and other rights to be effectively maintained, urban and rural basic medical insurance coverage of more than 95%." (China News, 2015).

To understand the influence of new media on health communication, Hu (2012) found that health communication in the age of new media had gone through rapid changes and had become more interactive and dialogue-based instead of one-way top-to-down communication between doctors and

patients. But we could not find any research study which focuses on the relationship between media content and its effect on the public perception about health issues confronting the Beijing community. However, there are two studies from the non-Chinese context, which deal with the agenda-setting power of the news media regarding a health issue. In a rather ancient study, Hubbell and Dearing (2003) investigated the agenda-setting role of newspapers. They found a weak correspondence between the newspapers' medical news agenda and the public's medical news agenda. In a similar way, Hong and Shemer (1976) compared the issue salience of the respondents with that of media and their talk partners. The findings showed that the interpersonal networks were found to have a greater convergence with respondents' perception of an important issue compared to issues priorities of the news media. Thus, these studies explicate that news media fail to set the public agenda regarding the health issue. To investigate the news media agenda-setting role regarding the aspects of a health issue at the sub-issue level, and to ascertain whether news media exposure corresponds to consensus or polarization among the demographic subgroups about the attributes of a health issue at a sub-issue level, we propose two hypotheses.

**H1:** Increased exposure to newspaper corresponds to the increased consensus or polarization among the demographic subgroups about the attributes of a health issue.

**H2:** Increased exposure to television corresponds to the increased consensus or polarization among the demographic subgroups about the attributes of a health issue.

### **Methods**

To examine whether news media exposure corresponds to the increased consensus or polarization, this study employed both content analysis and survey methods to test the hypotheses regarding the attributes of a health issue.

#### **Media Agenda**

We have content analyzed *People's Daily* and *China Central Television* two months prior to our survey of the respondents to constitute media agenda. As McCombs (2004) suggested that the maximum period for transfer of salience (both issue and attribute salience) from media to public agenda is four to eight weeks. So after collecting media content for eight weeks, we have conducted the survey. For content analysis, all the news related to health issue were collected from *People's Daily* from 1st September 2016-31<sup>st</sup> October 2016. For *CCTV*. We have collected data from the program "News Report" broadcasted at 7 P.M. throughout China. It is usually a 30-minutes news program. We have selected *People's Daily* and *CCTV* because they are the most influential national news media and are considered to be the agenda-setter for all other local and national media. The news was collected from the online edition of *People's Daily* and the website of *CCTV* for analysis. The media content was categorized into nine attributes at the sub-issue level. These attributes include *Medical Insurance*, *Physical Fitness*, *Medical Resources*, and *Awareness about diseases*, *Pollution*, *Food safety*,

*Traditional Chinese Medicine, Medical Caring Behavior and Doctor-patient Relationship.* The same coding sheet was used for the analysis of the newspaper and television content. We asked two graduate students to code the content. The inter-coder reliability was above 80.

#### **Public Agenda**

We collected survey data from the respondents (N=219) living in Beijing. This constituted our public agenda. The survey questionnaire was administered face to face to the respondents. The respondents were provided a list of the health-related aspects and were asked to rank these aspects according to their importance. To measure the salience of the aspects of the health issue among the public agenda, we used the Gallup poll question on “the most important issue” facing the community. The respondents were provided a list of nine health-related issues at the sub-issue level. The responses to these categories constitute a public agenda. More explicitly, Medical Insurance (22.4%), Physical Fitness (16.4 %), Medical Resources (13.7%), Awareness about Diseases (14.2%), Pollution (11%), Food Safety (10.5%), Traditional Chinese Medicine (4.1%), Medical Caring Behavior (4.6%) and Doctor-Patient Relationship (3.2%) constituted public agenda.

#### **Demographic Subgroups**

We divided our sample into four demographic subgroups: males 75 (34%), females 144 (66%), Education was divided into two categories; those with a university education, whether completed or in progress 180(79%) and without university education were 39(21%). Age was collected in years and was divided into younger and old categories, younger i.e., those who were less than 26 years old 133 (61%), and older who were more than 27 years old 86 (39%).

### Media Exposure

The media exposure measuring method of all the previous studies of the consensus-building role of media in the community was different (Chinag, 1995; Higgins, 2009; Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998a; Shaw & Martin, 1992; Yousaf, 2018a). However, this study has measured the media usage patterns by the respondents as measured by Shaw and Martin (1992). To measure media exposure, we have used standard questions. For measuring newspaper exposure the question was: How many days out of the last seven days did you read a daily newspaper whereas; for television exposure, the question was: How many days out of the last seven days did you watch the news on television? We have given the respondents three options for measuring their media exposure frequency. 1=Zero day reading, 2= One to three days reading, 3=Four to seven days reading for both newspaper and the television. In our survey 80.4% reported zero days reading, 13.2% one to three days and 6.4% four to seven days reading the newspaper. Similarly; for television viewing, 55.3% reported zero days watching television, 28.3% one to three days, and 16.4% four to seven days.

### Findings

The study was designed to find whether the news media exposure corresponds to consensus or fragmentation in the society regarding the attributes of the health issue at the sub-issue level. Table 1 shows how *People's Daily* and *China Central Television* (CCTV) rank-ordered nine attributes of the health issue at the sub-issue level and how the respondents using this media ranked-ordered them. When we conducted Spearman's rho between the media (both newspapers and television) and all respondents, the overall correlation was 0.25, a very weak association between the two agendas. Medical caring behavior and physical fitness ranked higher in the public agenda respectively; whereas medical insurance and food safety dominated the media coverage. However, when we dropped medical insurance, physical fitness, medical caring behavior, and food safety and conducted correlation among the remaining five attributes of the health issue, the correlation agreement between all respondents and the newspaper (*People's Daily*) was 0.90 at a significant level of .04. On the other hand, the relationship between television (CCTV) and all the respondents was 0.72, but it did not achieve a significance level of 0.05.

Table1: *People's Daily*, CCTV and Respondents Ranking of the Nine Attributes of the Health Issue

Issues	People's Daily	CCTV	Respondents
Medical Insurance	7	9	3
Physical Fitness	4	3	7
Medical Resources	2	5	4
Awareness about diseases	4	1	5
Pollution	1	1	2
Food safety	6	7	1

Traditional Chinese Medicine	8	6	8
Medical Caring Behavior	3	4	9
Doctor-patient Relationship	9	8	6

For the analysis of the public agenda of the demographic subgroups and their newspaper reading and television using patterns, we conducted spearman's rho between demographic subgroups and their three levels of using media. The relationships are presented in the form of a triangle ranging from non-users (zero days) of the news media through moderate users (1-3 days) to serious users (4-7 days). The results are shown in figure 1. It is evident that males and females who did not read the newspaper even agreed on the attributes of the health issue (correlation=1.00). For these non-readers both males and females have the same kind of relationship with the newspaper's agenda (.90). However, males and females who read one to three days' newspapers (moderate readers), there is less consensus among them (.70) compared to the non-readers (1.00), who agree completely. But for these moderate readers of newspaper news, females correlated more strongly (0.90) with the newspaper's agenda of attributes compared to males (.50), who agree moderately. For serious users (four-seven days) both males and females have a complete agreement with each other similar to non-reading respondents (1.00). However, serious female readers have more consensus (.70) with the attribute agenda of the *People's Daily* compared to men (.60). The same pattern is followed among age and education subgroups. The increased newspaper reading corresponds to the increased polarization of public opinion regarding the attributes of the health issue. The index of convergence in figure 2 shows that the increased newspaper readership leads to the increased polarization of public agreement on the attributes of the health issue. A sharp distinction can be observed between the non-readers and the readers. Notably, the non-readers show more consensus on the attributes of the health issue compared to moderate and serious readers.

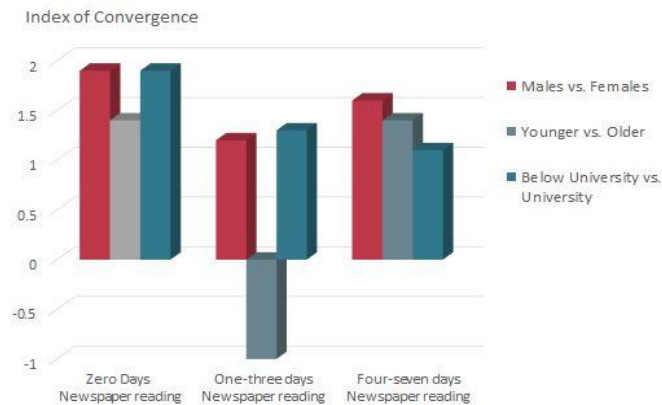


Figure 2: Index of convergence for the attributes of the health issue of Beijing residents for newspaper reading.

Turning to the television audience, the overall correlation of the television news agenda and the public agenda is (0.72), lower than the newspaper’s agenda (0.90) regarding the attributes of the health issue. For the television viewers, a similar pattern like the newspaper is observed, that is to say, increased television viewing corresponds to the increased polarization of public agenda of attributes of the health issue. In sum, our findings that increased news media exposure corresponds to the increased polarization of the public agenda of attributes of the health issue at the sub-issue level. Put it more explicitly, the more the public uses news media, the less they agree on the important attributes of the health issue.

Table2: Television viewing and level of agreement on attributes of the health issue among demographic groups

Variable	News Media use for day	Agreement on Issues
Gender Males vs. Females	Zero days	1.00
	1-3 days	0.70
	4-7 days	-1.00
Age Younger vs. Older	Zero days	.70
	1-3 days	-.10
	4-7 days	0.60
Education Below University vs. University	Zero days	1.00
	1-3 days	.50
	4-7 days	0.20

Table 2 shows that higher television viewing results in a very weak correlation for serious viewers for education (0.20), moderate for age (0.60)

and reverse for the gender (-1.00). So television did exercise influence on the respondents and pull them together on the key issues confronting the community in our study.

**Spearman Rho for the attributes of a health issue**

**Gender**

Zero-days Newspaper reading		one-three days Newspaper reading		Four-seven days Newspaper reading	
A= 0.90 B=0.70	B=0.90	A=0.50	B= 0.90	A= 0.60	
Males	C =1.00	Females	Males	C=0.70	Females
Females					Males C=1.00

**Age**

Zero-days Newspaper reading		one-three days Newspaper reading		Four-seven days Newspaper reading	
A= 0.70 B=0.90	B=1.00	A=0.00	B= 0.90	A= 0.80	
Younger	C=0.70	older	Younger	C=-1.00	Older
					Younger C=0.60
					Older

**Education**

Zero-days Newspaper reading		one-three days Newspaper reading		Four-seven days Newspaper reading	
A= 0.90 B=0.90	B=0.90	A=0.90	B= 0.80	A= 1.00	
Below C =1.00	University level	Below C = .50	University level	Below C=0.20	
University level					

Figure 1: Newspaper readership and consensus on the attributes of the health issue.

As a result, we conclude that higher newspaper usage results in an agreement on health issues among respondents having different social categories. Therefore hypothesis1 (H1) is supported for gender and education demographic subgroups. For television, this pattern of convergence has not been observed (Table 2).

**Discussion**

Our assumption is that when the audience shares the same news media, there is a consensus among them on the key issues and their attributes confronting the community served by the same media. In this regard, Shaw and Martin (1992) suggested that the news media are like magnets that pull people together on important issues, not their solutions. Likewise, news media like other institutions (education, religion, family, and political and economic institutions) create a worldview in the society which is more common and about which the majority of people have consensus. Thus, media, by focusing on key issues plays a significant role in the correlation of the components of the society (Lasswell, 1948). However, the findings of this study do not support this thesis. In contrast, the findings support the thesis that increased news media exposure corresponds to the increased polarization of public opinion regarding their understanding of the health issue. Put it more

succinctly, an increased news media exposure is associated with polarization of public perception of health-related aspects instead of creating consensus, that is to say, the more public use the news media, the more they disagree regarding their knowledge of health problems confronting Chinese society. One plausible explanation is that this polarization is caused by increasingly having audience selective exposure (Garrett et al., 2014; Mutz, 2006; Smith & Searles, 2013; Stroud, 2010). In addition, news media practitioners' professional routines, conventions, and news frames also are a cause of polarization of public opinion (Kim, 2016; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Put it differently, news media framing polarizes the public agenda. In sum, the findings of this study are consistent with the previous studies which support the news media consumption and corresponding polarization thesis (Garrett et al., 2014; Mutz, 2006; Smith & Searles, 2013; Stroud, 2010).

#### ***Agenda-Setting for Health Issue***

Media agenda-setting role regarding political, economic, and environmental issues has been supported in many studies to date (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mikami et al., 1995). However, the agenda-setting role of media for health issues has not been supported in previous studies (Hong & Shemer, 1976; Hubbell & Dearing, 2003). One of the plausible reasons for this non-existent role of news media agenda-setting for health issues can be event orientated and fragmented coverage regarding health issues. As a result, health-related issues did not get prominence in the media coverage which subsequently influences the public agenda (Onyeizu, & Binta, 2014). A lion share of news media coverage is dedicated to politics and political figures. In this regard, Kamboh and Yousaf (2020) found that the media's focus remains on political issues, and conflicts as well as external world issues. Consequently, human development issues get marginal coverage. However, China is a big country and her health system is one of the biggest and complicated systems in the world. And interestingly, most of the media outlets are state-owned and some are hybrid in nature. Their main focus is on the economic and developmental issues of the country. As a result, media fail to influence the public knowledge regarding the attributes of health issue. Put it this way, media are not able to develop consensus among diversified segments of the population via-a-via their understating and evaluation of the health issue.

#### ***Policy Implications: A way forward vis-à-vis Media's role setting health agenda***

Scientific studies support that news media is powerful enough to influence public opinion on the subject of politics, political figures, economic, and environmental issues date (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mikami et al., 1995). However, the media fail to set the public agenda for health issues. Based on the above discussion, we suggest some practical steps for policy implications vis-à-vis the media's role in setting the public agenda for health issues. For instance, public awareness regarding health issues can be increased by increasing media coverage. In this regard, low coverage of human development issues makes Kamboh and Yousaf argument

relevant here. They suggested that the coverage of human development issues must be increased to raise the awareness of the general public through adequate media coverage (Kamboh and Yousaf, 2020). As a result, this extensive coverage can influence the public's concern vis-à-vis health issues and their attributes. The sample size of this study was small. Further studies with a large sample size can be designed to explore the agenda-setting role of news media in Chinese society vis-à-vis health issues.

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