Between the Liminal and the Normal: How the News Constructed the Social Change of Face Covering During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States

XI CUI
FEIFEI CHEN
College of Charleston, USA

This study examined the news coverage in *The New York Times* of face covering in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic (N = 2,663). We found 6 phases of the coverage that alternated between disruption and normalization. They differed in the framing of face covering and the representations of social agents. Drawing on theorizations of liminality, social change, and journalistic practices, we argue that societal liminality like the pandemic does not necessarily progress linearly from disruption toward normalization, and the news coverage mediates the contestations among social agents in the process. Meanwhile, some journalistic norms may unintentionally prolong the liminal period, amplify social fragmentation, and reproduce the media's power to construct social reality.

Keywords: liminality, social change, mediated construction of social reality, face covering, journalistic norms

From commuting and socializing to shopping and schooling, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the taken-for-granted structure of daily life. Perhaps the most striking disruption of the pandemic life, which also feels the most contentious, has come in the form of face covering. It became emblematic of the pandemic disruption with the initial shortage in supply, the confusing guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. government (Larkin, 2021), and the subsequent misinformation surrounding and politicization of it (Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020).

In American society, face covering is especially perceived as an upheaval to established sociocultural structures. Before COVID-19, face coverings had already been perceived by the American public as a barrier to communicating personal emotions that are highly valued in the American culture (Hung, 2018). During the COVID-19 outbreak, because of its early association with China, masks also became a signal of outgroup identity to some Americans (Boykin, Brown, Macchione, Drea, & Sacco, 2021). The increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans who wore masks during the pandemic revealed a cultural understanding of masked individuals as diseased, weak, foreign, and socioracially inferior (Ren &

Xi Cui: cuix@cofc.edu
Feifei Chen: chenf@cofc.edu
Date submitted: 2021-10-29

Faegin, 2021). Therefore, any mandate or even recommendations of face covering may be interpreted as a form of social control and a threat to the tacit racial privilege embedded in the sociocultural structure of the American society (Choi & Lee, 2021).

Despite the controversies around face coverings, though, numerous public polls by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; Hutchins et al., 2020), news media (e.g., Katz, Sanger-Katz, & Quealy, 2020), and research institutions (e.g., University of Southern California, n.d.) consistently show that the wearing of face coverings did slowly pick up in March 2020, and by May of that year, most American adults had been routinely wearing them. Then why did the discourse around face coverings feel like an evenly matched controversy and a constant flashpoint in the American society throughout the pandemic (McKelvey, 2020)?

During societal disruptions like the pandemic, the media play a key role in the construction of social norms or the contestation over the normative structure in daily life (Coman, 2008; Cottle, 2006; Peterson, 2015). In this study, we examine ten months of *The New York Times*' portrayals of mask wearing and the contestations around it. We intend to go beyond news narratives to understand the role of the media during a sudden and drastic social change about the contestation over the normative life structure through their representation of various forces in the society.

In the sections below, we first draw on the idea of liminality in cultural anthropology to explicate the cultural logic of social change. We then review the media's role in constructing the process of social change and the process of power struggle over social norms. More specifically, we focus on the professional values and practices of news media that contribute to this construction in intended and unintended ways. Then with the empirical data, we aim to advance a processual yet nonlinear view of the media's role during drastic social disruptions.

Literature Review

Liminality and Social Change

To make sense of how society responds to a sudden breach of normal life like the pandemic, we first draw on the idea of liminality. It comes from van Gennep's (1960) theorization of rites of passage, the ceremonial patterns accompanying "a passage from one cosmic or social world to another" (p. 20). This special category of rituals includes a sequence of rite of separation, transition rite, and rite of incorporation. Among the three stages, the transitional rite is considered "liminal," derived from the Latin word *limen* for doorway or threshold. Such transition rites in people's ordinary lives include pregnancy, betrothal, initiation, and so on.

Victor Turner (1974) later took up on the concept of liminality to theorize structural social changes instead of symbolic changes in ritual forms. For Turner (1974), transitional rites should be seen as social events rather than "cultural genres in abstraction from human social activity" (p. 54). Performances in liminal events are "the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes, and adapted to their external environment" (Turner, 1967, p. 20). A society in the liminal stage is characterized by a

state of "betwixt and between" (p. 93) without a prescribed structural outcome. More recently, the idea of liminality has been used to understand drastic changes in modern societies such as political revolutions (Thomassen, 2014).

One important feature of the liminal stage is the temporary absence of the existing social structure, or "antistructure" (Turner, 1969). The temporary suspension of the existing rules, norms, and hierarchies leaves a structural void and brings possibilities for change. In tribal rituals, the antistructural liminal stage is usually symbolically performed in a highly scripted manner. The tribal society comes out of the liminality, supposedly united around a new or renewed social order.

But modern societies, when faced with unexpected liminal disruption such as a pandemic, do not always have a ritual script to deal with the antistructure. Therefore, the social structure, along with the power hierarchy, becomes precarious. Turner (1979) realized that the liminal quality in modern social life might be experienced as "plural, fragmentary and often experimental" (p. 492). The antistructural liminality in modern societies, with its lack of plan, the void of certainty, the anxiety induced in the process, and the power struggle among social agents over the establishment of new norms, often underlies real social change in times of disruptions (Szakolczai, 2009).

This conceptualization of liminality and social change foregrounds the agency and power struggle of various social actors (Thomassen, 2014). Large-scale social change in modern societies as a liminal configuration consists of agents and processes of "dis-membering" existing social structure as well as contested attempts at "re-membering" a new configuration (Shinar, 1996). In this process, root paradigms (values and ideologies), formulative efforts (institutional measures), and transformative agents (social actors) all interact to shape the social change during a liminal disruption. This framework has been applied to modern societies to understand social changes as power struggles ranging from social unrest to disaster responses (Coman, 2008; Cottle, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a suspension of the existing social order, qualifies as a society-wide liminal disruption, a suspension of the existing social order. Bell (2021) argued that, when the virus first hit, society had to suspend its taken-for-granted ways of life but had no script to follow from there. The logistic chaos, confusing guidance, fear of the disease, and above all, the lack of certainty threw society into a state of antistructure.

Meanwhile, the generative aspect of this liminal antistructure allows different possibilities to play out (Peterson, 2015; Thomassen, 2014). Businesses, governments on all levels and across the political spectrum, and civil forces ranging from scientific institutions to community activists inevitably compete to fill the void, define the ambiguous, and establish new structures aligned with their ways. In this process, the pandemic may end with a return to the existing life structure. Or a new postpandemic life structure may be instituted and routinized. Or else, schism may persist, and liminality may prolong. Regardless of the outcome, one social agent, the media, has an outsized influence in modern society in both portraying and constructing the power struggle, especially during a liminal time.

The Media and Social Change

The Media in Liminal Times

Conceptualizing the media as a force of sacralizing a certain structural change in society falls under the ritual view of communication (Carey, 1992). For rituals with a well-planned, controlled, and largely symbolic liminal stage like those theorized by van Gennep (1960), the media present them as classic media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992). These may include the moon landing, the inauguration of a president, the Olympic Opening Ceremony, and more. Societies come out of the liminal moments of the mediated rituals renewed or transformed into a new state in a socially integrative manner.

But as Katz and Liebes (2007) argued, contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by cynicism, disenchantment, and segmentation. In such context, disaster marathons (Liebes, 1998) are upstaging preplanned and socially integrative ceremonies with the increasing media coverage of disruptions like wars, terrorist attacks, and protests. During these unsettled times, "the perceived relationship between structure and routine in the process of meaning making is inverted" (Goode, Stroup, & Gaufman, 2020, p. 3): instead of interpreting the meanings of social practices in relation to the existing social structure in the quotidian life, various social agents compete to affix their own meanings to the liminal antistructure of life through their practices.

The media is an important site of such struggle in modern society (Coman, 2008). As Alexander and Jacobs (1998) argued, the media coverage of public crises "prescribe[s] struggles" (p. 28) and leaves the outcome of social structure contingent on power negotiation among social forces. Existing research shows intensive discursive contestation in various public crises, from tragic accidents to natural disasters to terror attacks (Cottle, 2005; Durham, 2008; Liebes & Kampf, 2007; Su, 2020). In some cases, the liminal crises were routinized into a new normal by the media (Liebes & Kampf, 2007; Su, 2020), while in others, the media may have wedged and perpetuated a cleavage in the society (Cottle, 2005; Durham, 2008). The divergent outcomes seem to rest not on the types of disruptions. Instead, deficient formulative efforts or active political contestations of social agents seem to be central to the liminal process.

Meanwhile, in mediating the power struggle during liminal times, the media are not simply passive conduits of information. Instead, they are at the center of the power struggle over the construction of social order. In a critique of media scholars' uncritical use of the idea of liminality, Coman (2008) advocated for a "post-Turnerian" (p. 102) view of the media. He saw the media itself as the one setting the stage of liminality and as holding, if not exclusively, the power of sacralizing a certain social structure out of the liminal antistructure. Cottle (2005) and Durham (2008) provided empirical support for the media's active role in promoting contestation and fragmentation during liminal times, instead of ritualizing unity. However, a gap in the literature lies in the specific processual mechanism of this media contestation. Existing studies seem to delineate the contestation as a linear process from chaotic liminality to a stable, normal state (e.g., Durham, 2008; Su, 2020). What is missing is the ebbs and flows of both the liminal and the normal in the contestation process.

The media's power to construct social order is most effective and inconspicuous in the everyday working of the media (Couldry, 2005). In this study, we specifically examine routine news coverage of face covering during the pandemic disruption. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the very working of some journalistic routines may be involved in the construction of a taken-for-granted social reality in intended and unintended ways during times of social change.

Journalistic Practices in the Construction of Social Reality During Liminal Times

The news media is a "shared symbolic system that constructs, organizes, and shapes the social reality around us" (Sumiala, 2014, p. 3). It shapes the social reality for us, especially during severe social disruptions, not only through the inherent characteristics of the news events but also through journalists' professional norms (O'Neill & Harcup, 2019; Staab, 1990).

Journalism as a social field has its internal logic (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017). Underlying its mediated construction of the social reality is a host of tacit presuppositions and rules that journalists invoke in routine works. It is such practices in news production that may sometimes obscure the journalistic intent and social function of journaling the social reality (Zelizer, 2013).

One of the ways to theorize these tacit presuppositions is gatekeeping (White, 1950; i.e., journalists deciding what news stories should be disseminated or omitted according to a set of normative judgments of news values; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Common news value judgments include timeliness, cultural and geographical proximity, impact or significance, conflict, novelty, and more (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Staab, 1990). When faithfully practicing these professional norms, journalists risk constructing a social reality for the audience with particular slants. For example, conflicts and deviations tend to gain more news coverage than quotidian and routine life structures, accentuating the liminal state of the society during a disruption (Willig, 2013). More importantly, during such social disruption, if social elites disagree on a controversial issue, as the indexing theory posits (Bennett, 1990), news media may elevate the prominence of the issue. Such discursive contestation portrayed in the news during a social disruption may signify the liminal state of the society and perpetuate social fragmentation (Blondheim & Liebes, 2002; Zelizer, 2013).

Journalistic framing serves as another mechanism of journalistic construction of the social reality. Building on anthropological insights from Bateson (1972), Goffman (1974) described framing as "the definition of a situation . . . built up in accordance with principles of organization that govern events and our subjective involvement in them" (p. 10). Turner (1979) further argued that the liminal rites of societal transitions depended on ritualized "social frames" (p. 489). The new and otherwise-insignificant meaning conferred onto society as a new structure relies on the performance of these social frames for the public.

In media studies, frames refer to the selected aspects of perceived reality, which, when connected into a narrative, can promote a particular interpretation for the audience (Entman, 2007). Such interpretations may accentuate certain attributes of an issue, privilege specific choices and actions, define causes and responsibilities, and so on. They may also communicate the social situation as normative structure or chaotic antistructure (Hallahan, 1999). When covering a liminal disruption in society, journalists may present news topics in frames that build consensus, while likely prioritizing establishment sources and

excluding deviant frames (Hallin, 1986; Schudson, 2003). But they may also treat the liminal antistructure as a legitimate controversy and mediate competing social agents' transformative efforts (Coman, 2008). As Scheufele (1999) showed, the journalistic frames of news stories contribute to the audiences' perception of the normative social reality.

It is important to bear in mind that, as Wolfsfeld (1997) pointed out, media frames are constantly contested and shifted as part of a more general power struggle in society. During a highly volatile liminal time, the media framing of a social disruption such as the September 11 attacks may be highly dynamic as the result of the power struggle among various social agents and the journalistic principles (Entman, 2003).

This is precisely the generative potential of the antistructural characteristic of the mediated liminal stage. Coman (2008) believed that to investigate the media's role in a time of societal liminality, it was not enough to look only at the social disruption itself as the source of potential social change. More importantly, we should examine how the news media, as the very site of power struggle, frame the social situation to resolve or perpetuate the liminality in the broader society.

Therefore, to understand the media's role in the society-wide liminal state during the pandemic, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1:   How did the frames of face covering in The New York Times change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2:   When it comes to face covering, how did the representations of various social agents change in The New York Times during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

Sampling

Our data set contains all articles mentioning face covering published between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, in *The New York Times*. Articles are identified in Gale Academic OneFile database, which archives all articles published in both the online and the print versions of this newspaper. A total of 2,663 unique articles were identified through search terms including "mask, face covering, neck gaiter," and "scarf." To represent the overall mediated construction of face covering in the news, the sample includes all staff-produced news, editorials, by-lined opinion columns, and letters to the editor.

We chose *The New York Times* to generate the text corpus for the following reasons. First, *The Times* fits what is considered a "newspaper of record" with its reputation of commitment to accuracy, objectivity, depth, and the geographic and subject scopes (Kapel & Schmidt, 2018, p. 208). Second, previous studies have used *The Times* as the sole source of corpora of traditional news (Tandoc, 2018), which has been found to set the agenda for other media outlets (Golan, 2006). Lastly, we reckon that the prolonged sampling period and the large sample size should serve as a relatively comprehensive representation of the overall coverage of face covering in the U.S. news.

The sampling period was determined for both empirical and practical reasons. The United States declared the first case of community spread on February 26, 2020, when the total case number in the United States was 15 (CDC, 2020). The next 10 months until the end of 2020 saw major developments of the pandemic in the United States with various government measures and civil society reactions. The numbers of articles mentioning face covering were 48 and 79 in January and February. The number jumped to 152 in March and varied between 200 and 300 per month through the rest of the year. Therefore, we consider the 10-month sampling period adequate to cover major developments of the pandemic in the United States in 2020.

Coding Scheme

To answer RQ1 about the changes in face-covering frames during the pandemic, we first employed the "manual-holistic approach" (Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009, p. 180) to inductively extract qualitative frames about face covering. Then the corpus of text was quantitatively coded with each frame as a holistic variable. Because we are interested in the framing of face covering as a process of constructing a normative structure of the society (i.e., wearing or not wearing masks as a sense of taken-for-granted norm), we paid special attention to the "operational meanings" of face covering conveyed in the news coverage (Turner, 1974, p. 53). According to Turner, symbols can be analyzed for their positional meaning (syntactics), exegetical meaning (semantics), and operational meaning (pragmatics). Operational meaning refers to the relationship between the symbol and its users. Therefore, instead of focusing on attributes of or cultural meanings associated with face covering, we focused on portrayals of what social agents do about face covering, what face covering does to social agents, and what social agents do to each other about face covering as frames of "situations" of "everyday living" (Hallahan, 1999). A total of nine frames were extracted, including "stance, wearing, enforcement, supply, effectiveness, practicality, conflict, irrelevant," and "foreign" (see Table 1 for descriptions and examples).

RQ2 asks about the changes in the representations of various social agents in the 10 months' news coverage of face covering. We followed Steurer's (2013) distinction of three major social agents (i.e., government, civil society, and business) to capture the major power structure in a democratic society (see definitions and examples of the social agents in Table 1). Shinar's (1996) study on protest as a social disruption showed that these social agents acted as formulative agents and implemented transformative efforts with aligned or conflicting cultural values during a liminal period in society. The media, during such period, was an important field where society's power struggles could play out and social change be instituted (Coman, 2008).

Since the research questions on the changes in news frames and representations of agents are meant to shed light on the struggle over (non)change during a society-wide liminal disruption, it is important that the coding scheme captures the forces of both push and pull in the process. Therefore, the frames of "stance," "wearing," "enforcement," "supply," "effectiveness," and "practicality" were each divided into a positive and a negative code. The frame of "conflict" did not have inherent valence and was directly incorporated into the frame coding scheme. Since this study focuses on the United States, news on face covering in other countries was coded as "foreign" and excluded from further analysis. Mentions of masks that did not refer to COVID-19-related face covering were coded as "irrelevant" and excluded from analysis

(see Table 1 for examples). Social agents of governments, civil society, and business were also each divided into a positive and a negative code to capture their contribution or impediment to face covering.

Eventually, 13 frame codes and six agent codes were created to guide the content analysis. Table 1 presents their definitions and examples.

Table 1. Coding Scheme.

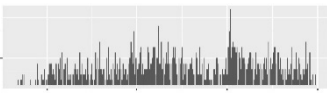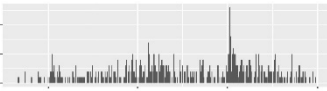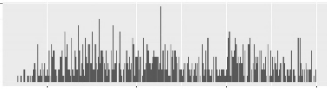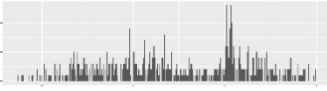| Code	Definition	Example
Framing codes		
Stance	Laws, rules, suggestions, opinions, descriptions of hypothetical scenarios of wearing (+) or not wearing (−) face coverings.	Airlines required all passengers to wear face coverings on flights. A government official's objection to mask mandates.
Wearing	Accounts of wearing face coverings and taking face coverings off when they are not necessary according to CDC guidelines or local rules (+), accounts of not/incorrectly wearing face coverings or taking them off against guidelines or rules (−).	Individuals wear face shields and masks in stores. Protestors get together without mask.
Enforce	Actions to enforce existing rules of face covering in specific contexts, such as a store, home, public transportation, and so on (+), inaction or difficulty to enforce such rules (−).	Volunteers ensure hurricane evacuees to wear masks in a shelter. An individual expresses reluctance to ask others to also wear masks.
Effectiveness	Claims or scientific evidence/mechanism of the effectiveness (+) or ineffectiveness (−) of face coverings to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.	Reports of COVID-19 cases drops in states with local mask mandates. Research findings of the ineffectiveness of flat surgical masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
Practicality	Easiness, convenience, unintended benefits (+), difficulty, inconvenience, unintended harm (−) of wearing face coverings.	Masks help warm air up for runners during cold days. Masks frequently fog up glasses.
Supply	Providing, producing, or innovating (+), or the lack thereof (−), of face coverings, their accessories, and technical standards, etc.	A clothing company is enlisted to manufacture masks. Postal workers said the agency failed to meet their needs for supplies such as masks.
Conflict	Actions or remarks of blaming, mocking, protesting specific individuals or groups, remarks of politicizing face coverings; expressions of confusion over conflicting information or policies about face covering.	A restaurant worker is shot by a customer mad at a mask-wearing request.
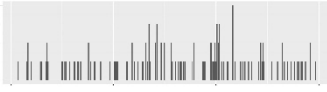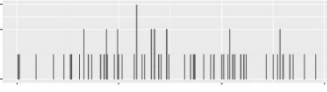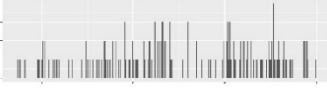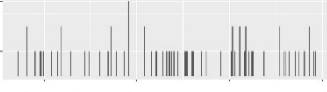
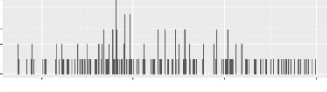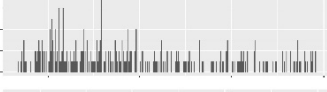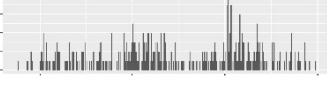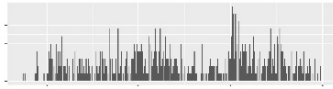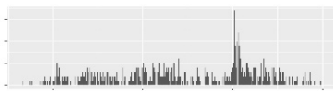|		
Foreign	Mention of face covering in non-U.S. context. (Do not further code this instance for other variables.)	A barbershop in Manila posts a mask-wearing notice.
Irrelevant	The use of a keyword does not refer to COVID-related face coverings. (Do not further code this instance for other variables.)	An expert says high completion estimate of 2020 national census might mask other statistical inaccuracy.
Agent codes		
Government	Government agencies and government officials on various levels, including medical experts speaking in governmental capacities, supporting (+) or against (−) face coverings	Portrayal of a patrolling police officer wearing a blue face mask. A report of how the government fails to obtain supplies such as masks early on during the pandemic.
Civil society	Nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations, individual citizens, supporting (+) or against (−) face coverings.	Community volunteers hand out masks to residents. Citizens protest against mask mandate.
Business	For-profit companies, individuals in business capacities, supporting (+) or against (−) face covering.	An online retailer releases TV ads to show its frontline employees are provided with masks. A company speaks out against local mask mandate.
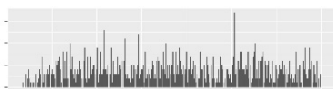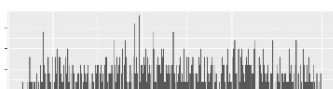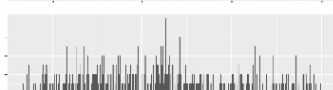
Note. Both "+" and "−" denote positive and negative codes of a frame. Two examples are provided for each frame, one for each valence.

Coding

Two coders coded the sampled articles. Each article was coded for the presence or absence of the thirteen frame codes and six agent codes. Coder 1, who created the coding scheme, trained Coder 2, who remained blind to the research questions during the coding process. The two coders respectively coded the same subset (n = 300, 11.3%) of randomly selected articles from the sample. After practice and discussions, the coders reached satisfactory inter-coder reliability readings ranging between 0.77 (positive "practicality") and 0.97 ("irrelevant") on the 21 measurements (Krippendorff, 2004). The two coders then split the rest of the data and coded them independently. Eventually, a total of 4,941 framing instances and 3,590 agent instances were coded from the corpus of 2,663 articles. Table 2 presents the overall frequency, the daily frequency range, and the plot of frequency change throughout the sampling period for each variable.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Coded Variables.

Code		Freq.	Daily Freq. Range (min/max)	Freq. Trend (Mar.–Dec.)
Framing codes				
Stance	+	1006	0/14	
	−	495	0/13	
Wearing	+	882	0/12	
	−	579	0/13	
Enforce	+	125	0/4	
	−	64	0/3	
Effectiveness	+	161	0/4	
	−	68	0/3	
Practicality	+	21	0/1	
	−	180	0/5	
Supply	+	289	0/7	
	−	132	0/6	
Conflict		369	0/8	
Foreign		333	0/6	Excluded from analysis

Irrelevant		237	0/4	Excluded from analysis
Total		4,941		

Agent codes				
Government	+	659	0/10	
	−	561	0/17	
Civil society	+	1,164	0/17	
	−	681	0/9	
Business	+	376	0/8	
	−	149	0/4	
Total		3,590		

Note. The scale on *y* axis of each plot is based on the corresponding code's daily frequency range in the sampling period.

Results

The research questions ask about the changes in frames (RQ1) and in the representations of social agents (RQ2) in the news coverage of face covering in the first 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to understand the mediated process of social change about the norm of face covering during the society-wide liminal disruption. We argue that the fluctuations of the "conflict" frame best represent the mediated construction of face covering either as a liminal disruption or a normative everyday structure because this frame directly captures the contestation over accepting or rejecting face coverings as a new social norm. After iterative readings of the news and analyzing the fluctuations of the conflict frame, we distinguished six phases of the portrayals of face covering. In each phase, the salience of different frames and social agents vary, which demonstrates the power struggle over establishing face covering as an everyday norm. These phases are marked by the vertical, dotted lines in Figure 1. The research questions will be answered below according to the phases. To focus on the larger trend, the data were reaggregated by weeks instead of days.

The six phases were alternating periods between disruptions and attempts at normalizations. Phase 1 (March 1–March 30) was the initial disruption by the onset of the pandemic. CDC confirmed the first

community-spread case in the United States on February 26. The most frequent frame codes in this period were negative "supply" reporting the PPE shortage and positive "supply" as a result of the efforts to replenish the masks, mostly by civil society actors and businesses (Figure 1a). Notably, there were few frames of "conflict," negative "stance," or negative "wearing" up to this point. The initial reaction from the government was scant (Figure 1b), while the civil society, mostly the healthcare system, spearheaded the responses to the upheaval to the normal life. The federal government as a social agent that holds a privileged position in the existing social structure (Shinar, 1996) failed to implement formulative measures concertedly or swiftly against the liminal threat early on. The increase in the government stringency index (dotted line in Figure 1c), a measurement of the strictness of governments' COVID-19 policies (Hale et al., 2021), mostly resulted from local governments' discrete efforts.
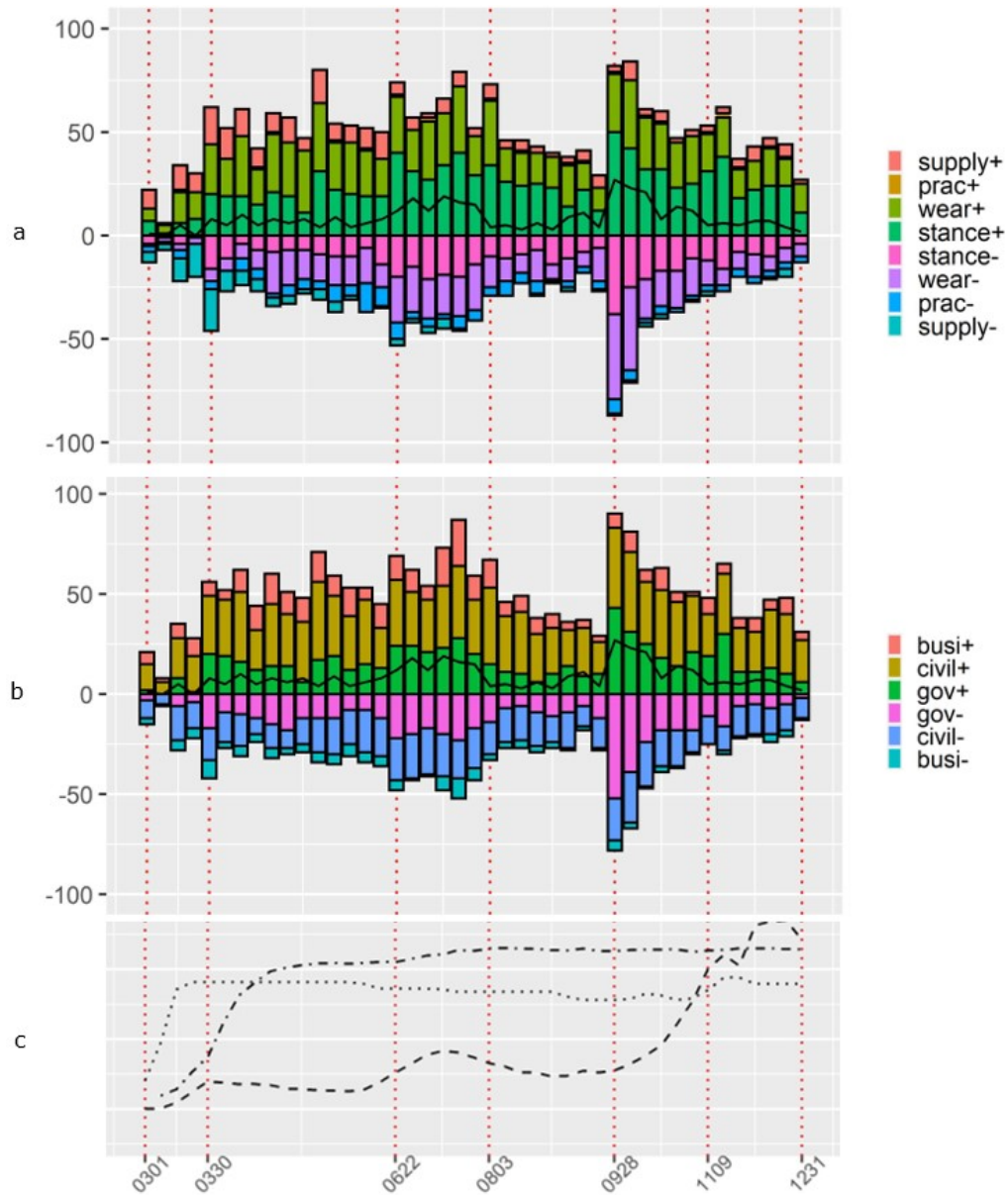
Figure 1. Changes in frames, representations of social agents, and pandemic background data.
Notes. Figures 1a and 1b show changes in the frames (a) and the representations of social agents (b). The y axis is the weekly cumulative frequency of frames (a) and representations of social agent (b). The solid lines in (a) and (b) represent changes in "conflict" frame. The term "prac" refers to the frame of "practicality"; "busi" refers to "business" agent. For visual clarity, positive and negative codes of "effectiveness" and "enforce" are omitted in (a) because of their low frequencies. Refer to the plots in Table 2 for their distributions. The dash line in (c) represents the U.S. case load during the sampled period (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.; range: 76, 216454); the dotted line in (c) represents the stringency index based

on the regulations issued by all levels of government in the United States (Oxford University, n.d.; range: 16.4, 75.5); the dot-dash line represents the percentage of people routinely wearing face coverings among the U.S. population (University of Southern California, n.d.; range: 7.6%, 92.3%).

Phase 2 (March 30–June 22) was a period of attempts at normalization characterized by society-wide (mal)adaptations. This is a prolonged period when opposing efforts on face covering by various social agents brewed. In this period, the negative "supply" frame decreased as the mask shortage eased while the negative "practicality" frame became more prominent. The negative "practicality" frame encoded the unintended negative consequences reported in the news. They were deviations from the existing life structure. The negative "practicality" frame included the fogging up of glass lenses when wearing masks, the "masknes" (mask-acne) on nurses' faces, Black runners' fear of increased racial profiling when they jog with face coverings, and the impact of losing teachers' facial cues in kindergartens and other places. These are micromanifestations of the antistructure against the previously taken-for-granted life order. Meanwhile, compared to Phase 1, frequencies of the positive and negative "stance" and "wearing" frames dramatically increased in Phase 2. This trend is coupled with the increase in representations of government agents in the news. In fact, the CDC issued its first recommendation for the use of face coverings on April 3, and the next day, President Trump stated that he would not be wearing one. During this time, although the positive frames and agents stayed relatively stable, negative frames and agents saw a gradual increase. Especially negative mentions of the civil society steadily increased, suggesting brewing conflicts in the broader society, leading up to Phase 3, another period of intense disruption.

After Phase 2 as a stage of attempts at normalization, Phase 3 (June 22–August 3) was marked by intensive politicization of face covering. This period saw a dramatic increase in the total number of coded instances and particularly the frequency of the conflict frame (solid line in Figures 1a and 1b). The increase, as can be seen in Figure 1b and the plots in Table 2, mainly resulted from the representation of government agents. During this period, some governments pushed for mask mandates in their jurisdictions while others tried to preempt such efforts. Trump also restarted campaign rallies after pausing them between March 2 and June 20. However, despite the raucous politicization of masks, as seen in Figure 1b, positive frames of business and stance played a stabilizing role in pulling the overall news coverage of face covering toward the positive territory. A reading of the news articles confirmed that it was businesses in this phase that produced most of the positive instances of the stance frame and governments produced most of the negative ones. As a result of the intensive period of conflict, even as the caseload increased dramatically during the period, the government stringency index actually decreased (Figure 1c).

After the rebalancing of power in Phase 3, we conceptualize the ensuing period (Phase 4: August 3–September 28) as another period of attempts at normalization. This was the least contentious phase during the 10 months period of analysis. During this time, the overall positive frames consistently outweighed the negative ones with the conflict frame and the stringency index decreased (dotted line in Figure 1c) and caseload (dash line in Figure 1c) stabilized. The frequency of the government frame decreased much more than that of civil society. It seems as if a new structural equilibrium was emerging in the overall society. However, the relatively quiet period in this liminal process of the pandemic was unexpectedly upended by yet another phase of disruption.

Phase 5 (September 28–November 9) started with the breaking news that Donald Trump contracted the coronavirus on October 2. The data showed immediate spikes in both positive and negative "wearing" and "stance" frames as well as representations of government agents. These changes were mostly because of news stories providing contexts for Trump's diagnosis (i.e., references to Trump and his officials' conflicting behaviors and stances on mask wearing in the past; Figure 1a). The share of other frames and agents in the overall coverage was dramatically compressed even though the actual frequency of those frames did not decrease very much or even increased (plots in Table 2). The frequency of the conflict frame as well as the government representations remained high during this period.

The last period, Phase 6 (November 9–December 31), was another calming down and normalizing period. This time around, we saw the starkest disparity between positive codes and negative codes. Most of the decrease in the negative frames and agent representations was because of the decrease in governments' negative "stance." With Biden winning the election, more positive frames were recorded mostly on the "stance" frame, while the "wearing" frame stayed stable. In fact, even if a negative "stance" or "wearing" frame was used, an accompanying mentioning of the positive "stance" or "wearing" by the president-elect was usually provided. Meanwhile, the positive "effectiveness" frame and the "practicality" frame also saw increases (plots in Table 2), suggesting a shift toward less politicized discourse. The civil society's positive and negative frames stayed stable.

The overall pattern our data reveal is one of alternations between disruptions and attempts at normalization, between intensiveness and relative calmness, with shifting frames and social agents represented throughout the process.

In the discussion section, we will provide an interpretation of the findings in terms of how the struggle over social norms and power, in this case the social change about face covering, played out in the media during a society-wide liminal period. We will also discuss how the journalism institution, with its particular values and practices, mediated these changes (i.e., contributed to the construction of the social reality).

Discussion

A Nonlinear Process of Liminality in the Media

When the once-in-a-century pandemic started, the existing life structure was breached without a readily available script to respond with. Instead, the liminal time of a changing society became a stage of open-ended contestation partly played out in the media. As shown in the results, at least for the first 10 months of the pandemic, American society experienced a prolonged ambiguous limbo, during which multiple phases of disruptions alternated with attempts of normalization. But it eventually failed to establish a stable structure of the pandemic life when it comes to face covering.

This long and intense process of contestation over face covering is nonlinear and differs from typical issue attention cycles in public health events such as the mad cow disease and West Nile virus infections (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008). Instead of the public gradually losing interest in face covering because of

the high cost of it on the taken-for-granted lifestyle (i.e., the third stage in a typical issue attention cycle; Down, 1972). Each new development of the pandemic seemed to thrust the issue of face covering back into the spotlight and renew the contestation over the normative structure of daily life.

The prolonged liminality may have resulted from the interaction of multiple factors. First, because of the slow spread of the disease at the very beginning, journalists did not treat the pandemic response measures as a hegemonic sphere of consensus (Hallin, 1986; Schudson, 2003) or frame a shared identity and social solidarity, as they would have during sudden catastrophes. Instead, routine gatekeeping and framing practices positioned the issue in the sphere of legitimate debate (Durham, 2008). Second, at the moment of breach, the lack of formulative responses from government sources or civil institution sources such as the WHO may have prevented the news media from building consensus frames in the first place. As the indexing theory argues (Bennett, 1990), when institutional elites disagree with each other during a crisis, the media are likely to make the contestation a salient public agenda and unintentionally exacerbate the social disruption. Third, the larger zeitgeist of cynicism, disenchantment, and segmentation of the society (Katz & Liebes, 2007) may have undermined efforts by the media, the government, and some civil forces to "re-member" the society as the crisis "dis-member[s]" it (Shinar, 1996).

Unlike previous analyses of social disruptions as a social drama, where a liminal stage progresses from breach to crisis to redress and ends with either integration or schism (e.g., Cottle, 2005), our data showed that the liminality period may be caught between crisis and redress for a prolonged period without a linear path forward. The oscillating phases between disruptions and attempts at normalization show that the ritual power of the media today may have shifted away from legitimizing a social order and promoting social solidarity to legitimizing power struggle and perpetuating social fragmentation. In this process, from Coman's (2008) post-Turnerian perspective, the prolonged liminality precisely reproduces the media's own power to construct a social reality.

Admittedly, the media's power is neither absolute nor isolated. It only exists in relation to the way the media, in this case journalism, is practiced as well as how other social agents dynamically respond. Therefore, next, we shift toward a discussion of the relationship between journalistic principles and the liminal stage of social change.

From Journalistic Norms to Social Norms

It seems that the media served as the site of contestation and constructed a nonlinear liminal stage of alternating disruptions and normalizations. Based on our data, we further argue that a host of journalistic principles and practices contributed to this nonlinear development of the liminal state of face covering. This is the unintended consequence when journalists dutifully practice their professional norms regardless of the societal implications beyond reporting the news (Panievsky, 2021).

First, Figures 1a and 1b show an almost symmetrical shape between the upper and lower halves. In each bar (week) in the figures, although the compositions of frames and agents in the lower and upper halves did not usually mirror each other, the overall increase or decrease in one half is almost always accompanied by a similar change in the opposite direction. This is true for both the normalizing (2, 4, and

6) and disruption (1, 3, and 5) phases. For example, when Donald Trump fell ill in early October, even though the media focused on his negative mask stance and behaviors, the negative frames on "stance" and "wearing" were compensated with a spike in their positive counterparts by the government and the civil society (Figure 1a and plots in Table 2). Vice versa, when Trump endorsed mask wearing for the first time on July 21 (the second bar to the left of August 3 in Figure 1a), the increase in positive government representations was matched by an increase in the negative government representations.

This adherence to the "strategic ritual of objectivity" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 660) may have unintentionally shifted the boundary between the sphere of consensus and the sphere of legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986). With politicized and fragmented issue publics, such balanced reporting may have unintentionally constructed a sense of face covering as a legitimate democratic debate instead of a public health imperative. What is more, partisan audiences tend to selectively recall, categorize, and judge media content with a hostile media bias (Schmitt, Gunther & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985). With such bias, objective reporting may be perceived as favoring the opposing position on face covering by both sides of the issue public and undermine the perceived credibility of journalism.

Second, the prolonged liminality may also be related to journalistic gatekeeping practices. As reviewed earlier, an event's magnitude, negativity, and deviation from norms, as well as the social elites involved in the events, all contribute to the journalistic construction of social reality (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill & Harcup, 2019). As index theorists argued, elite discord following a crisis could give rise to discursive contestations in the media (Bennett, 1990). The media coverage could then legitimize the controversy and hinder the establishment of a normative structure in response to such crisis (Entman, 2003). A close reading of the news stories showed that the three phases of disruption (Phases 1, 3, and 5) were largely driven by the journalistic selection of conflicts, negativity, deviation, and prominent sources.

Phase 1 mostly focused on the dramatic accounts of mask shortages, especially by healthcare workers. This includes their rationing and reusing the personal protective equipment in a contaminated work environment, their emotional plea for the equipment, and the chaotic and dramatic efforts to hustle the equipment. Phase 3 was characterized by the spike in conflict frames, featuring many stories of protests against face-covering regulations, fights in stores and parks over face-covering enforcement, and acrimonious exchanges among politicians.

Phase 5 was driven by Donald Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis, admission into the hospital, greeting of supporters outside the hospital in his limousine, as well as the dramatic ripping off the mask when returning to the White House. In fact, throughout the 10 months of reporting, the journalistic focus on hard news gave much privilege to government sources (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), despite, or perhaps because of their antimask stance. This ranges from Congressman Matt Gaetz's wearing a gas mask on the House floor to mock the pandemic concerns, to Mike Pence's maskless visit to the Mayo Clinic, and Trump's ridiculing of Biden's "big mask." The high visibility of these behaviors in the news perhaps elevated the legitimacy of these government officials' eye-catching performances in the society's liminal moment. In turn, as scholars have warned (Blondheim & Liebes, 2002; Zelizer, 2013), these gatekeeping practices may have amplified misinformation, deepened a social chasm, and prolonged the societal liminal stage.

Conclusion

This study examined *The New York Times*' coverage of face covering in the United States during the first 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We distinguished six phases alternating between disruptions and attempts at normalization. These phases differ in their framing of face covering and their representations of social agents on this issue. Drawing on theorizations of liminality, social change, and journalistic practices, we argue that the liminal period in a society after a disruption may not linearly progress toward a stable life structure. Instead, it partly depends on how the media frames the contestations among social agents. We show that the media's adherence to journalistic norms, such as gatekeeping and objectivity, may have unintentionally prolonged the societal liminality, perpetuated existing social fragmentation, and, along the way, preserved its own power of constructing the social reality.

Findings of the study shed light on the cultural logic of social change after a dramatic disruption in today's highly mediatized society. We advocate for a post-Turnerian, nonlinear processual view of social change. We argue that a disruption of existing social structure does not necessarily progress toward or end up with a new or renewed norm. Instead, scholars should heed the power struggles among social agents, especially in the form of discursive contestation, during the societal liminality. Moreover, the media are increasingly entangled in such power struggles. In their mediation of a society's liminal time, the media, through their professional routines, may further consolidate their symbolic power to construct social reality, increasingly in the form of ritualizing social fragmentation instead of solidarity.

References

Alexander, J., & Jacobs, R. (1998). Mass communication, ritual and civil society. In T. Liebes & J. Curran (Eds.), *Media, ritual and identity* (pp. 23–41). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Bell, G. (2021). Pandemic passages: An anthropological account of life and liminality during COVID-19. *Anthropology in Action: Journal for Applied Anthropology in Policy and Practice, 28*(1), 79–84. doi:10.3167/aia.2021.280115

Bennett, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state. *Journal of Communication, 40*(2), 103–127. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1990.tb02265.x

Blondheim, M., & Liebes, T. (2002). Live television's disaster marathon of September 11 and its subversive potential. *Prometheus, 20*(3), 271–276. doi:10.1080/08109020210141434

Boykin, K., Brown, M., Macchione, A. L., Drea, K. M., & Sacco, D. F. (2021). Noncompliance with masking as a coalitional signal to U.S. conservatives in a pandemic. *Evolutionary Psychological Science, 7*(3), 232–238. doi:10.1007/s40806-021-00277-x

Carey, J. W. (1992). *Communication as culture, revised edition: Essays on media and society*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, February 22). *CDC confirms possible instance of community spread of COVID-19 in U.S*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s0226-Covid-19-spread.html

Choi, H. A., & Lee, O. E. (2021). To mask or to unmask, that is the question: Facemasks and anti-Asian violence during COVID-19. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work, 6*(3), 237–245. doi:10.1007/s41134-021-00172-2

Coman, M. (2008). Liminality in media studies: From everyday life to media events. In G. St John (Ed.), *Victor Turner and contemporary cultural performance* (pp. 94–108). New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Cottle, S. (2005). Mediatized public crisis and civil society renewal: The racist murder of Stephen Lawrence. *Crime, Media, Culture, 1*(1), 49–71. doi:10.1177/1741659005050243

Cottle, S. (2006). Mediatized rituals: Beyond manufacturing consent. *Media, Culture & Society, 28*(3), 411–432. doi:10.1177/0163443706062910

Couldry, N. (2005). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Downs, A. (1972). Up and down with ecology—the "issue-attention cycle." In D. Protess & M. E. McCombs (Eds), *Agenda setting: Readings on media, public opinion, and policymaking* (pp. 38–50). New York, NY: Routledge.

Durham, F. (2008). Media ritual in catastrophic time: The populist turn in television coverage of Hurricane Katrina. *Journalism, 9*(1), 95–116. doi:10.1177/1464884907084342

Entman, R. M. (2003). Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11. *Political Communication, 20*(4), 415–432. doi:10.1080/10584600390244176

Entman, R. M. (2007). Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power. *Journal of Communication, 57*(1), 163–173. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00336.x

Entman, R. M., Matthes, J., & Pellicano, L. (2009). Nature, sources, and effects of news framing. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 175–190). New York, NY: Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Golan, G. (2006). Inter-media agenda setting and global news coverage: Assessing the influence of the New York Times on three network television evening news programs. *Journalism Studies, 7*(2), 323–333. doi:10.1080/14616700500533643

Goode, J. P., Stroup, D. R., & Gaufman, E. (2020). Everyday nationalism in unsettled times: In search of normality during pandemic. *Nationalities Papers, 50*(1), 61–85. doi:10.1017/nps.2020.40

Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R., Kira, B., Petherick, A., Phillips, T., . . . Tatlow, H. (2021). A global panel database of pandemic policies. *Nature Human Behaviour, 2021*(5), 529–538. doi:10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8

Hallahan, K. (1999). Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 11*(3), 205–242. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr1103_02

Hallin, D. C. (1986). *The uncensored war: The media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harcup, T., & O'Neill, D. (2017). What is news? News values revisited (again). *Journalism Studies, 18*(12), 1470–1488. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193

Hart, P. S., Chinn, S., & Soroka, S. (2020). Politicization and polarization in COVID-19 news coverage. *Science Communication, 42*(5), 679–697. doi:10.1177/1075547020950735

Hung, Y. W. (2018). *A study of barriers to the wearing of face masks by adults in the U.S. to prevent the spread of influenza* (PhD dissertation). Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

Hutchins, H., Wolff, B., Leeb, R., Ko, J., Odom, E., Willey, J., . . . Bitsko, R. (2020). COVID-19 mitigation behaviors by age group—United States, April–June 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 69*(43), 1584–1590. doi:10.15585/mmwr.mm6943e4

Johns Hopkins University. (n.d.). *COVID-19/csse_covid_19_data/csse_covid_19_time_series/*. Github.com. Retrieved May 17, 2021 from https://github.com/CSSEGISandData/COVID-19/tree/master/csse_covid_19_data/csse_covid_19_time_series

Kapel, S., & Schmidt, K. D. (2018). Media literacy and newspapers of record. *Reference Services Review, 46*(2), 205–216. doi:10.1108/RSR-02-2018-0012

Katz, E., & Liebes, T. (2007). "No more peace!": How disaster, terror and war have upstaged media events. *International Journal of Communication, 1*, 157–166.

Katz, J., Sanger-Katz, M., & Quealy, K. (2020, July 17). A detailed map of who is wearing masks in the U.S. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/17/upshot/coronavirus-face-mask-map.html

Krippendorff, K. (2004). Measuring the reliability of qualitative text analysis data. *Quality and Quantity, 38*, 787–800. doi:10.1007/s11135-004-8107-7

Larkin, M. (2021). Mask confusion in NYC with abrupt CDC guidance changes. *The Lancet: Infectious Diseases, 21*(7), 921–921. doi:10.1016/S1473-3099(21)00343-1

Liebes, T. (1998). Television's disaster marathons: A danger to democratic processes? In T. Liebes & J. Curran (Eds.), *Media, ritual and identity* (pp. 71–85). New York, NY: Routledge.

Liebes, T., & Kampf, Z. (2007). Routinizing terror: Media coverage and public practices in Israel, 2000–2005. *International Journal of Press/Politics, 12*(1), 108–116. doi:10.1177/1081180X06297120

McKelvey, T. (2020, July 20). Coronavirus: Why are Americans so angry about masks? *BBC*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53477121

O'Neill, D., & Harcup, T. (2019). News values and news selection. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 213–238). New York, NY: Routledge.

Oxford University. (n.d.). *COVID-policy-tracker/data/timeseries/stringency_index.csv*. Retrieved May 17, 2021 from https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/blob/master/data/timeseries/stringency_index.csv

Panievsky, A. (2021). Covering populist media criticism: When journalists' professional norms turn against them. *International Journal of Communication, 15*, 2136–2155.

Peterson, M. (2015). In search of anti-structure: The meaning of Tahrir Square in Egypt's ongoing social drama. In A. Horvath, H. Wydra, & B. Thomassen (Eds.), *Breaking boundaries: Varieties of liminality* (pp. 164–182). New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Ren, J., & Feagin, J. (2021). Face mask symbolism in anti-Asian hate crimes. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 44*(5), 746–758. doi:10.1080/01419870.2020.1826553

Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication, 49*(1), 103–122. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x

Schmitt, K. M., Gunther, A. C., & Liebhart, J. L. (2004). Why partisans see mass media as biased. *Communication Research, 31*(6), 623–641. doi:10.1177/0093650204269390

Schudson, M. (2003). What's unusual about covering politics as usual. In B. Zelizer & S. Allan (Eds.), *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 70–80). New York, NY: Routledge.

Shih T., Wijaya, R., & Brossard, D. (2008). Media coverage of public health epidemics: Linking framing and issue attention cycle toward an integrated theory of print news coverage of epidemics. *Mass Communication and Society, 11*(2), 141–160. doi:10.1080/15205430701668121

Shinar, D. (1996). Re-membering and dis-membering Europe. In A. Sreberny-Mohammadi & S. Braman (Eds.), *Globalization, communication, and transnational civil society* (pp. 89–103). New York, NY: Hampton Press.

Shoemaker, P., & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Staab, J. F. (1990). The role of news factors in news selection: A theoretical reconsideration. *European Journal of Communication, 5*(4), 423–443. doi:10.1177/0267323190005004003

Steurer, R. (2013). Disentangling governance: A synoptic view of regulation by government, business and civil society. *Policy Sciences, 46*(4), 387–410. doi:10.1007/s11077-013-9177-y

Su, C. (2020). Feeling the catastrophe: The interplay between emotional story-telling and journalistic authority in the televisual construction of natural disasters. *Asian Journal of Communication, 30*(5), 363–385. doi:10.1080/01292986.2020.1813182

Sumiala, J. (2014). Mediatized ritual–Expanding the field in the study of media and ritual. *Sociology Compass, 8*(7), 939–947. doi:10.1111/soc4.12188

Szakolczai, A. (2009). Liminality and experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events. *International Political Anthropology, 2*(1), 141–172.

Tandoc Jr., E. C. (2018). Five ways BuzzFeed is preserving (or transforming) the journalistic field. *Journalism, 19*(2), 200–216. doi:10.1177/1464884917691785

Tandoc Jr., E. C., & Jenkins, J. (2017). The Buzzfeedication of journalism? How traditional news organizations are talking about a new entrant to the journalistic field will surprise you! *Journalism, 18*(4), 482–500. doi:10.1177/1464884915620269

Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the modern living through the in-between*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology, 77*(4), 660–679.

Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Turner, V. (1974). Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual. *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies, 60*(3), 53–92.

Turner, V. (1979). *Process, performance, and pilgrimage: A study in comparative symbology*. New Delhi, India: Concept.

University of Southern California. (n.d.). *Understanding America study*. Retrieved from https://uasdata.usc.edu/index.php

Vallone, R., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*(3), 577–585.

van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

White, D. M. (1950). The "gate keeper": A case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly, 27*(4), 383–390. doi:10.1177/107769905002700403

Willig, I. (2013). Newsroom ethnography in a field perspective. *Journalism, 14*(3), 372–387. doi:10.1177/1464884912442638

Wolfsfeld, G. (1997). *Media and political conflict: News from the Middle East*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Zelizer, B. (2013). On the shelf life of democracy in journalism scholarship. *Journalism, 14*(4), 459–473. doi:10.1177/1464884912464179