

EXPLORING DIGITAL DIVIDE FROM A DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES* AND *CHINA DAILY*

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Using discourse studies, this study interrogates the media representations in The New York Times and China Daily concerning the digital divide from key fields of research interests, that is, problem definition, causal attribution, solution interpretation, and outcome evaluation. Reports in The New York Times tend to represent the digital divide through individualized disparities and policy-oriented debates, emphasizing its socio-economic impact on marginalized individuals. By contrast, reports in China Daily consistently represent the issue within narratives aligned with state-driven developmental objectives, foregrounding governmental agency and policy initiatives in advancing technological equity. The analysis demonstrates that the divergent representations reflect the distinct socio-political and economic contexts shaping each publication's editorial discourse. The study makes a valuable intervention by shifting the analytical focus from measuring the digital divide to examining how the issue is discursively constructed for public audiences.

KEYWORDS digital divide; news reports; media representation; *The New York Times*; *China Daily*

In an era characterized by pervasive digital transformation, scholarly inquiries into the digital divide have progressively intensified (Friemel 2016; Cruz-Jesus et al. 2018; Peng and Dan 2023), paralleled by expanding global media coverage of the issue. The digital divide, commonly defined as disparities in accessing and utilizing digital technologies across different socio-economic groups (Wei 2024), represents a critical social challenge. Stark global inequities persist, particularly between developed and developing nations, in both access to and meaningful engagement with digital resources (Drori 2012; van Dijk 2020; Ma 2024). As digital connectivity becomes increasingly central to economic participation, education, governance, and social inclusion, the digital divide has evolved into a pressing worldwide concern, demanding coordinated action of national governments, international organizations and stakeholders across multiple domains (ITU 2024; OECD 2025).

A distinct “divide” has been developed between the media’s concern about the digital divide and academia’s relative inattention to the media’s representations of the issue. Although the concept first gained public prominence through news reports in the United States in 1995, only a handful of studies have examined its mediated representations. Despite consistent media coverage over time (Robison and Crenshaw 2010; Lythreathis et al. 2022), there remains a paucity of scholarly investigation into the role of the media in shaping public understanding of the digital divide in different national contexts. To date, most studies have instead examined the determinants, causes, social consequences, outcomes and solutions of the digital divide, often from the perspectives of various groups of individuals between countries or within countries (van Dijk 2020; Wei 2024). Yet, analysing media representations of the digital divide is of substantial scholarly relevance, as mainstream news media still wields influence in driving public discourse on complex social issues characterized by multifaceted and often intangible causes and impacts (McCombs 2014; Rui 2021). The ways in which mainstream newspapers conceptualize and problematize the digital divide can provide valuable insights into the interplay between journalistic discursive practices and social reality in diverse societal settings.

The digital divide manifests differently in developed and developing countries due to variations in economic development (Guillen and Suarez 2005; Pick and Nishida 2015), government policies (Ragnedda and Muschert 2018; Adam and Dzang Alhassan 2021), technological infrastructure (Cullen 2003; ITU 2024), cultural contexts (Drori and Jang 2003) and so on. Increasingly, this phenomenon has become synonymous with a broader “development divide” (World Bank 2024). Currently, the United States and China collectively account for more than half of the global value added in information and communication technologies (hereafter ICTs) manufacturing and ICT services (ITU 2024), and issues in the ICT sector stand at the vanguard of the competition between these two countries (World Bank 2024, 26, 33). The United States possesses a well-established legacy of pioneering digital innovation (Espín and Rojas 2024), whereas China has demonstrated accelerated advancement in technological development and digital transformation in recent decades (Zhao and Kuang 2025).

Given their prominent yet contrasting positions within the global digital divide (Pick and Sarkar 2015; Cruz-Jesus et al. 2018), shaped by divergent economic structures, policy approaches, technological infrastructures, and cultural contexts, this study goes beyond the practical dimensions of ICTs to focus on how the digital divide is discursively represented in *The New York Times* (hereafter, NYT) from the United States and *China Daily* (hereafter, CD) from China. A comparative study of media coverage provides a unique lens to understand how different political, social, and economic contexts influence the portrayal of critical issues (Entman 2004).

The contributions to the literature on the digital divide are threefold. First, moving beyond the reliance on quantitative indicators, this study foregrounds the discursive construction of the digital divide, demonstrating how media representations in the NYT and CD actively shape public perception and, by extension, policy priorities. By investigating the representational features of news reports, it bridges the gap between empirical data on digital disparities and the discursive frameworks through which these disparities are legitimized and prioritized in the public sphere. Second, the comparative study uncovers the complex mediation of digital inequalities, revealing how journalistic practices in each outlet align with and reinforce distinct national trajectories of digital developments. Despite the rapid proliferation of new ICTs worldwide, profound inequalities persist on the globe. Rather than simply confirming assumptions about liberal versus state media,

this study uncovers the specific discursive mechanisms, that is, issue definition, causality attribution, solution interpretation, and consequence evaluation, through which each outlet negotiates the tension between rapid technological proliferation and persistent structural inequalities, thereby revealing the interplay between geopolitical context and media representation. Third, by critically mapping these discursive strategies, the findings provide actionable insights for policymakers, and media practitioners. The study offers evidence-based guidance for designing context-sensitive approaches to digital inclusion, particularly for nations navigating complex socio-technical landscapes and geopolitical dynamics in the digital era, thus contributing to more effective cross-cultural communication and policy formulation.

The Digital Divide: A Persistent and Evolving Social Reality

The digital divide remains a persistent and contested conceptual framework within academic discourse, fundamentally reflecting systemic inequalities in the digital age (van Dijk 2020; Wei 2024). Despite its ubiquity, scholarly consensus on its definition remains elusive. As the relationship of human and technology evolves, the scope of the digital divide has extended to encompass “the difference in access, use and domestication of digital technologies that exists at the level of individuals, regions or countries and occurs at different developmental stages of digital technologies” (Wei 2024, 22). This expanded conceptualization transcends narrow access-based frameworks to encompass socio-technical dimensions of domestication, the process through which technologies become embedded in daily life (van Dijk 2020; Wei 2024).

Despite the conceptual complexities introduced by rapid technological advancement, the digital divide continues to garner considerable scholarly attention. A multitude of factors contributing to this divide have been assessed, including socioeconomic status (Guillen and Suarez 2005; Pick and Nishida 2015), educational attainment (Cruz-Jesus et al. 2016; Wei 2024), geographic location (van Dijk, 2020; Pick and Sarkar, 2021), and policy environments (Ragnedda and Muschert 2018; Adam and Dzang Alhassan 2021). Initially framed primarily as a socioeconomic indicator for ICT development disparities (van Dijk 2020, 15), the implications of these disparities extend beyond “material access”, “mental access”, “skills access”, and “usage access” (van Dijk 2020). These dimensions collectively underpin the societal consequences of digital inequality, which extend beyond technological access to constrain economic mobility (Guillén and Suárez 2005), social inclusion (Wong et al. 2010), and civic participation (Perez-Morote et al. 2020).

The three levels of the digital divide at the individual level suggest the evolving human-technology relationship, and its correlation with economic and social advancements (Attewell 2001; Wei et al. 2011; Ragnedda 2017). When aggregated at the national level, these disparities constitute the “global digital divide”, that is, the differences in digital development levels across nations (Cruz-Jesus et al. 2018). While this conceptual scaffolding has generated substantial empirical research on the determinants of digital inequalities, measures for crossing the divides, and impacts of the digital policies, existing scholarship on the digital divide has established a robust analytical paradigm centred on four interrelated dimensions: problem construction, causal attribution, solution interpretation, and outcome evaluation (Cruz-Jesus et al. 2018; van Dijk 2020; Wei 2024). This paradigm provides a theoretically grounded methodology for dissecting media representations of this social reality. Consequently, empirical analysis of news coverage concerning the digital divide must rigorously engage with these four dimensions to uncover underlying discursive patterns and their implications for public comprehension.

The Meaning-making of News Discourse

While media discourse has significant potential to shape this digital-related agenda, there have been few attempts to examine the discursive manner in which the digital divide is mediated. Critiquing dominant definitions of the digital divide in the policy documents in the United States using Fairclough's Textually Oriented Discourse Analysis, Stevenson (2009) found that the digital divide is construed as a rhetorical trope to place responsibility for social and economic inequalities in the emerging global information economy on the individual rather than the economic or political system. Greene (2016) explored that the "digital divide" was initially framed as a national economic crisis in the official documents, and discovered the discursive role information technology played in the economic transition promoted by the Clinton administration. There remains a notable gap in understanding the role of media discourse—through discourse strategies, or emphasis on certain aspects of the divide. This gap in the literature is significant, given that individuals tend to invoke traditional media outlets as primary authorities that shape their factual knowledge and perceptual frameworks regarding social issues like the digital divide (Couldry 2020).

The news media serve as a key conduit for informing the public about digital concerns. In the context of the digital divide, it acts as an influential variable (Perrons, 2004), a metric for assessment (Dargin et al. 2021), and a crucial intermediary in evaluating social outcomes (Li and Chen 2023). The underlying causes or far-reaching societal consequences of the digital divide are not readily apparent, a reality with which the general public often remain unacquainted. Representations in mass media are likely to shape how the digital divide is perceived by the public—influencing not merely awareness levels, but also policy discourse and societal efforts to address digital inequalities.

News discourse endows specific reality with meanings through selection, interpretation, and evaluation. News outlets do not merely "report" events but construct public understanding by selecting certain aspects of an issue or emphasizing specific "attributes" of an issue (Entman 1993), a process deeply embedded in social contexts. This selection process is not arbitrary, as news discourse assigns "meaningful roles" to actors and defines the "problems" themselves through lexical choices, symbolic cues, and themed structures. The "specific reality" of social phenomena, including complex issues like the digital divide, will be narrowed to a manageable, ideologically consistent subset, endowing the digital divide with an initial layer of meaning by defining what counts as relevant to public understanding.

Once "relevant reality" is selected, news discourse proceeds to interpretation, that is, organizing fragmented information into coherent discursive practices that guide audience comprehension. Interpretation endows the selected reality with a discursive logic—shaping how audiences make sense of why the digital divide exists and what should be done about it. The causes and solutions of the digital divide are "produced in a wide range of national contexts varying by political system, economies, cultures, and organization of the media" (Firmstone 2024, 2).

Evaluation in news discourse involves assigning positive, negative, or neutral value to the interpreted reality, embedding it within broader societal norms and hierarchies. News plays a role of constructing ideologically motivated versions of reality (Baker et al. 2013, 3), which are embedded within a value system, guiding audience judgments about the consequences of the digital divide. Thus, news reports function as a barometer of societal engagement surrounding a specific topic, representing audiences with the distant worlds for their reactions and involvement.

The representation of news discourse is a dynamic, context-dependent process through which news media select, interpret, and evaluate information to form coherent, socially meaningful discursive practices about public issues—including phenomena like the digital divide. The semiotic aspect of a social order is an order of discourse (Fairclough 2001). News discourse positions media not as passive transmitters of information, but as active agents in shaping how societal issues like the digital divide are understood, debated, and addressed. The study aims to answer the following questions through a corpus-assisted discourse analysis:

RQ1. What discursive patterns are associated with the recurrent themes of the “digital divide” issue in NYT and CD?

RQ2. What aspects do NYT and CD focus on respectively in discursively representing the issues of the digital divide in congruence with their respective socio-political concerns?

Methodology

Data Collection

Two influential broadsheets, the NYT from the United States and CD from China, are selected as they “are responsive to scientific and social learning, to changing political agendas and contexts, and to the communicative strategies” of national and international agencies (Carvalho and Burgess 2005). In the digital divide in a global sense, compared with the United States, usually represented as the highly developed information havens (Cruz-Jesus et al. 2018), China has undergone a remarkable digital transformation since its full-function access to the world wide web in 1994 (Internet Society of China 2025), often represented “with universal connectivity still a distant prospect” (ITU 2023). They are chosen to reveal the distinctions between nations at different positions concerning the digital divide. The present study therefore chooses the American and Chinese newspapers as the research objects to compare their representations of the digital divide.

The selection of the NYT and CD is grounded in their authoritative status, though they operate under distinct institutional logics. NYT is selected for “having the largest circulation among metropolitan newspapers in the United States” (Aswad 2019), and for being “regarded as a national newspaper of record in the United States” (Raj 2020, 1215), which results in the fact that it is viewed as responsible for setting the country’s media agenda and setting the standard for other newspapers (Mnookin 2004). It also commands a strong reputation among international audiences. Through its digital edition, NYT reaches subscribers in over 200 countries and territories. This global circulation affords NYT a unique position as a primary source of English-language news for international elites, policymakers, and academics who rely on its reporting for information about the United States. In contrast, CD is chosen for being China’s first and largest national English-language newspaper, and for being “a significant news agenda-setter in the Chinese media system” (Duan and Takahashi 2017). Its reporting style is widely regarded as the most Western-aligned among Chinese newspapers. Due to their widespread influence and authoritative standing, these media outlets serve as the principal lenses through which social issues are interpreted. In this capacity, they are instrumental in constructing national identities, making them inherently intertwined with national ideologies and values.

In the *LexisNexis* news database, the keyword “DIGITAL DIVIDE” was used as a search term. The results were manually checked to weed out reports where the “digital divide” was just mentioned. Full texts of official government documents or reports, frequently

seen in CD, and syndicated material, are screened out as little has been done by the news agencies. In addition, editorial articles were also excluded from the corpus because they represent institutional opinions rather than journalistic reporting, potentially introducing divergent discourse strategies that are not directly comparable with news reports. The available *LexisNexis* news database only includes news texts in CD from January 1, 2014. To ensure the comparability of the corpus, the period of collecting news reports in this study was set as from January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2023. In the end, a total of 463 news reports were collected, among which 287 news reports (202,163 word tokens, 10,548 word types) were obtained from CD and 176 news reports (217,211 word tokens, 15,777 word types) were obtained from NYT respectively.

Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis (hereafter CADS) has emerged as a robust methodological approach to uncover how discourse shapes public understanding. CADS addresses some major criticisms of discourse studies such as small data sizes or possible cherry-picking of certain data or linguistic features to prove a preconceived point (Partington 2004), making it particularly suitable for examining the representation of social issues in media (McEnergy and Hardie 2011).

CADS is comparative in nature as “it is only possible to both uncover and evaluate the particular features of a discourse type by comparing it with others” (Partington et al. 2013, 12). This perspective is particularly relevant when examining NYT and CD, two publications from vastly different geopolitical and digital development contexts. To conduct a systematic keyword analysis, the NYT corpus and the CD corpus are alternately used as each other’s reference corpus to obtain keyword lists by employing the corpus program *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott 2008). This alternating design was chosen because it enables the identification of statistically significant lexical features that distinguish one corpus from the other, thereby foregrounding the contrasting discursive strategies each newspaper employs when reporting on the digital divide. This reciprocal procedure allows for the identification of distinctive discursive features relative to the specific context of the other newspaper, rather than against a generic standard English corpus. By doing so, the analysis highlights the unique ideological and thematic priorities of each outlet regarding the digital divide, ensuring that the identified keywords reflect specific editorial stances rather than general linguistic variations.

Keywords, one of the two frequency-based techniques widely used in CADS, are words that are more frequent than expected in one corpus, usually being representative of a notional ‘standard language’ (Baker and McEnergy 2015, 2). Keywords were extracted using the log-likelihood statistic, which is considered more reliable than chi-square for corpus comparisons, particularly when dealing with low-frequency items (Rayson and Garside 2000). A cut-off threshold of $p < 0.0001$ was applied to ensure that only statistically significant keywords were retained for analysis, thereby minimizing the risk of Type I errors. Additionally, only words with a minimum frequency of five occurrences in the target corpus were considered for keyword status, following the convention established by Baker (2023, 158). No minimum word length was imposed, although function words were manually excluded from the final keyword lists to focus on content-bearing lexical items. Concordances were then generated for the candidate keywords to examine their collocational patterns and surrounding discourse contexts, which helps ascertain whether a phrase carries different evaluative stances across corpora and to uncover patterns of meaning, structure, and ideology (Rayson and Garside 2000).

By employing CADS, this study seeks to uncover the linguistic, thematic, and contextual differences and similarities in the coverage of the digital divide by NYT and CD. It allows for an objective measurement of language use, which can reveal underlying biases, emphases, and possibly overlooked aspects of how the digital divide is discussed in different socio-political contexts. Thus, the quantitative analysis describes the characteristics of the overall data, revealing recurring systemic phenomena. The qualitative analysis delves deeper into the corpus details based on the stable features presented by the quantitative data, interpreting these features through specific illustrations and exploring the contexts that shape them.

Analysis

The Keywords

The top 50 keywords identified in news reports on the digital divide in NYT and CD offer valuable insights into the divergent representations of the issue in different socio-political contexts. As shown in Table 1, the top 50 keywords were manually extracted from the *WordSmith* output, with all functional words excluded. It indicates that NYT and CD approach the issue with different focal points and contexts.

The top 50 keywords in NYT can be categorized into government and political figures, broadband and technology companies, education and public resources, and temporal demonstratives. Scanning for the agents in the NYT keyword data gives us a lot of personal pronouns like *you, they, we, he, and she*, suggesting a conversational reporting style that is more direct and person oriented. Keywords such as *federal, Biden, bill, republican, democrats, and mayor* highlight the role of government and political discourse in NYT. This suggests an emphasis on the legislative aspects of addressing the digital divide in the United States, discussed in the context of political leadership, federal legislation, and bipartisan debates. The inclusion of *broadband, service, providers, Verizon, Google, and program* points to a focus on the corporate entities involved in the provision of infrastructure and Internet services, suggesting market-oriented approaches to address the issue. Equality is another pivot theme highlighted as educational equality and racial equality. The keywords *school, library, students, children, and parents* indicate the concern for equal access to educational resources and the role of digital connectivity in learning environments. The keywords like *black, families, and Americans* hint at NYT’s preference to connect the digital divide to existing social disparities, including race and income.

TABLE 1
The Top 50 keywords identified in the two corpora ordered by log ratio

Corpus	Keywords
NYT	You, Mr., Ms., who, what, her, broadband, they, federal, she, Americans, get, school, do, library, my, had, Biden, much, say, city, home, housing, bill, going, how, we, republican, want, when, service, voters, when, back, think, families, screen, me, black, his, democrats, out, students, hours, children, mayor, time, parents, providers, here, now, Google, Dr., Twitter, program, Verizon
CD	China, development, digital, cooperation, global, countries, economy, international, AI, China’s, trade, developing, technologies, cyberspace, governance, growth, Chinese, promote, innovation, Xi, sustainable, Africa, economic, elderly, Asia, smart, transformation, world, inclusive, industrial, Pacific, commerce, developed, Huawei, UN, forum, initiative, promoting, south, nations, future, summit, information, digitalization, road, enterprises, intelligence, shared, ASEAN, platform

The top 50 keywords in CD can be categorized into national and global development, international cooperation, technological innovation and advancement, strategic initiatives, digital governance, and inclusivity. CD spotlights the role of advanced technologies, international partnerships, and strategic initiatives in addressing digital inequalities. The prevalence of keywords such as *China*, *development*, *digital*, *economy*, *international*, and *growth* indicates that the digital divide is in China's broader national and global development agenda. Keywords like *cooperation*, *global*, *countries*, *international*, *trade*, *developing*, and *cyberspace* point to China's efforts to position itself as a key partner in global digital initiatives, particularly with developing economies like *Asia*, *Pacific*, *south*, *Africa*, and *ASEAN* to shape international norms and rules in the digital domain, displayed by keywords such as *cyberspace*, *governance*, *information*, *platform*, and *summit*. Keywords like *inclusive*, *shared*, *promoting*, *future*, *sustainable*, *initiative* and *road* may relate to significant policy frameworks such as the *Belt and Road Initiative*, which includes digital components like the *Digital Silk Road*, positioning China as a responsible stakeholder in bridging global digital gaps. This is explicitly contrasted with the critical representation of US policies in NYT.

Discursive Representations of the Digital Divide

Based on the above findings, the following section elaborates on the distinct discursive representations of the issues in NYT and CD. It will proffer clues from the perspectives of defining the issues, identifying the causes, interpreting the solutions, and evaluating the consequences, to enhance our understanding of the nuances in news discourse surrounding the digital divide. To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, the following analysis is based on a systematic selection of concordance lines identified through a combination of keyword frequency and contextual salience. The examples provided were selected to represent recurring discursive patterns rather than isolated instances and further validated by cross-checking with thematic patterns to capture both typical and outlier articulations.

Defining the Issues

A preliminary observation of NYT's coverage might suggest that the newspaper individualizes the digital divide as an individual, or household issue, given its frequent use of personal vignettes and emphasis on disparities that affect personal and familial circumstances. However, a systematic examination of the corpus reveals a more complex picture. While NYT indeed employs personalization as a journalistic device, foregrounding the experiences of individuals, families, and specific demographic groups, this narrative strategy does not amount to an ideological displacement of structural responsibility. In fact, the corpus contains substantial and sustained attention to institutional dimensions, including federal policy debates, municipal broadband initiatives, the role of public libraries, racial disparities in access, educational inequities, and the challenges faced by low-income households.

A critical redefinition of the issue is evident in the article *America's Real Digital Divide*, which shifts the focus from access to technology to a "divide in understanding and managing screen time among parents". It might initially appear to individualize the issue by focusing on parents' screen time management. However, a close linguistic analysis reveals that the journalist consistently anchors the problem in institutional failures. The passive construction "parents are misled" backgrounds the agent of deception, while the clause "facts have not been allowed to get in the way" (Riley 2018) again omits the actor. The cumulative effect is to diffuse responsibility across educational,

and corporate systems. Thus, the journalist claimed that the digital divide in the United States should be defined as a gap in knowledge and understanding of screen time among parents rather than merely a gap in children's access to technology, thereby subtly shifting the blame toward broader systemic inequalities. By juxtaposing individual stories with policy analysis, the NYT constructs a narrative where individual agency and systemic responsibility are inextricably linked, reflecting a multifaceted approach to defining the digital divide.

The digital divide in CD is represented as a critical element of national development (1), international cooperation (2), and technological innovation (2). CD employs a more formal or collective discourse, reflecting its emphasis on national policy and development rather than individual experiences. The responsiveness and adaptiveness of Chinese authorities are represented through the commitments and determinations of China's digital divide bridging policies in addressing the related pressing societal issues, utilizing picturesque phrases such as "campaign", "economic recovery", and "pioneer" to project a positive and proactive narrative regarding the bridging of the digital divide. This discursive strategy mitigates the representation of structural issues such as economic inequality, instead foregrounding the state's role in addressing societal challenges.

(1) Bridging the digital divide in sectors deemed crucial for seniors is the first step **in a three-part campaign** to mitigate the impact of sweeping digitalization on older people.

(2) Given that digital transformation will redefine the global division of labour, all countries should promote **international cooperation in digital innovation**, work together to bridge the "digital divide" and turn digital transformation into a new driver of economic recovery.

(3) Zhao Houlin, secretary-general of International Telecommunication Union, said China is **a pioneer** in reducing the digital divide, with a strong input of resources to ensure that more people can access fast, affordable mobile communication and broadband network services.

In contrast with NYT, CD not only reports on the domestic digital divide but also covers extensively on tackling the digital divide in other countries, especially in developing countries. While the domestic divide is narrowing (Fan 2019; Quaye-Kumah 2023), the divide between countries is, or more likely to be, widening (Hou 2016; Cheng 2022). With regards to the global digital divide in CD, the articles project China's positive image as cooperative and responsible, showcasing China usually plays a contributive and exemplary role in global digital development. (3) highlights the nation's significant resource input to ensure access to affordable mobile communication and broadband services. It not only showcases China's domestic achievements but also represents its international engagement as exemplary, thereby linking national development to global responsibility.

Identifying the Causes

As the NYT's portrayal consistently highlights the personal impact of the digital divide, it is essential to distinguish between two distinct dimensions of this representation. First, the newspaper employs personalization as a journalistic technique, using individual stories to make the issue relatable and accessible to readers. Second, and more significantly,

the coverage often individualizes the issue ideologically, representing digital exclusion as a matter of personal or institutional responsibility rather than a consequence of systemic or political factors. This ideological displacement shifts attention away from political and economic barriers, such as inadequate federal policy, insufficient municipal broadband infrastructure, and socioeconomic inequalities, and places the burden of connectivity on individual Americans and their households. Although policy interventions aimed at bridging the gap, for example initiatives to improve broadband infrastructure (4) or provide affordable technology solutions (5), are frequently discussed or debated, NYT focuses on the systemic inequalities that persist, suspending the effectiveness of policies (5). In (5), it characterizes Ajit Pai's 11-month tenure as a period of aggressive deregulation, where the "biggest victory" is defined by the dismantling of regulatory barriers rather than the expansion of public welfare. It highlights a distinct ideological shift toward market consolidation, evidenced by the facilitation of media mergers and the relaxation of antitrust norms. Furthermore, by curtailing support for low-income Internet programs and permitting rate hikes for business customers, the F.C.C. signals a retreat from viewing Internet access as a social equity issue, instead prioritizing corporate autonomy and treating connectivity as a market commodity.

(4) That means municipalities that want to keep expanding their municipal broadband networks will have **to fight to overturn state laws on their own**.

(5) Passing the plan would be the biggest victory in Mr. Pai's eventful 11-month tenure as the head of the F.C.C. Under his leadership, the agency has already opened the door for more media mergers, **curtailed a high-speed internet program for low-income families** and **allowed broadband providers to raise rates to business customers**.

These examples show that solving the issue is like a wrestling matter between the individual and the system. The lack of infrastructure forces individuals to seek alternatives. The need to "fight to overturn state laws" (4) implies that existing legislation may be a barrier to providing broader access to high-speed Internet.

Regarding causal attribution of the domestic digital divide, CD offers limited explicit evidence, except for some vague sense that it is "because of economic reasons" (Wang 2020), without specifying which economic mechanisms, such as regional disparities, household income thresholds, or infrastructure investment gaps, are at work. In (6), the structural and policy-related underpinnings of the digital divide are inadvertently downplayed, and the causes of the intergenerational divide are abstracted into "incompatibility between the elderly when using technology and social norms" (Liang, 2021). It suggests that solutions lie primarily in personal initiatives rather than in comprehensive, societal interventions.

(6) Aging itself is not a problem, nor is digitization itself. The problem is that the economic, social, political and cultural institutions that fit a young society are **incompatible** with an aging society.

However, this structural focus appears to recede when CD examines the digital divide in developing countries beyond China. Scholarly consensus emphasizes that national policies are an important factor influencing the digital divide, and countries with greater policy initiatives have a greater advantage in narrowing the digital divide (Cullen 2003).

This appears to be reflected in CD's representations of global dynamics, where barriers to digital inclusion in other developing countries are linked to "the hugely monopolized global trade and economy" (Turkson 2016), the eroded effectiveness of existing global rules (Azmeah 2017), and "digital hegemony" (China Daily Global 2021). These representations acknowledge the necessity of structural and institutional interventions to address digital inequality. In these contexts, causal attribution becomes far more concrete and structurally critical. This asymmetry suggests that CD's discourse on causality is strategically modulated: domestic digital divides are depoliticized and attributed to vague or abstract factors, while international digital divides are attributed to an unjust global order, thereby positioning China as a responsible actor advocating for structural change abroad.

Interpreting the Solutions

While both news outlets acknowledge the necessity and importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in technology and infrastructure to address the disparities, NYT emphasizes the roles of service providers and current political dynamics, whereas CD stresses technological innovation and international cooperation.

NYT tends toward a problem-solving narrative that emphasizes personal experiences and political accountability, advocating for immediate action to address disparities in digital access and usage. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, immediate actions, as suggested in (7), are critical in addressing the urgent needs of communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Discursively, the excerpt performs several operations of agency and responsibility. The first sentence uses a generic declarative ("is a long-term problem") with an implied agent (society or government). The modal "requires" constructs necessity without specifying who must provide the resources. However, the second sentence shifts sharply: the subject "the federal government and the technology and communications sector" is explicitly named as the responsible agent. The modal "should work together" expresses a strong obligation, and the directive "to take immediate, emergency actions" leaves no ambiguity about the urgency. Notably, the goal of these actions, "to get high-quality broadband into homes", is represented as a concrete outcome, with "homes" as the beneficiary. The reference to "communities hit by the coronavirus" further contextualizes the digital divide as an urgent social vulnerability exacerbated by a public health crisis.

The stimulant effects of individual or household connectivity are represented as "essential for kids even when in-person classes resume" (Ovide 2020). An urgent need for policy changes and accountability in addressing the digital divide is illuminated in NYT. The impact of digital policies within the administration is spotlighted as a potent issue in campaigns for mayor or president (McGeehan 2016; Sorkin et al. 2021). The instrumental role of domestic institutions rather than international partnerships on access and equity issues related to digital resources, such as broadband availability and digital literacy among different socio-economic groups, is usually represented as financial supporters as in governmental-led *E-rate program*, *LifeLine Program* and "Broadband for All" initiative, or legislative regulators through funding initiatives or bill vote (8).

(7) Eliminating the digital divide permanently is a long-term problem that requires sustained resources and commitment. But the federal government and the technology and communications sector should work together — right away — **to take immediate, emergency actions** to get high-quality broadband into homes in communities hit by the coronavirus.

(8) If the bill's aims are to be achieved, we must **partner with and invest boldly in these trusted institutions** to make these historic investments **an immediate reality**.

In contrast to CD, the significant role of libraries is emphasized in shaping access and use of digital resources (9) in NYT. CD entails only 4 occurrences of the item “library*”, while NYT includes 289 occurrences. Public libraries have long been the preferred societal mechanism for levelling the information access field (Compaine 2001, 331). All libraries, especially public libraries, are portrayed as essential catalysts for curating a diverse array of digital resources (9). This perspective aligns with the views of Kinney (2010) or Grimes and Porter (2024), who investigated the pivotal role of libraries in guaranteeing equitable access as part of their commitment to digital inclusion.

(9) Libraries offer **all people** — regardless of background or circumstance — **free access to the tools and knowledge** they need to open doors of opportunity and be productive members of society. To remain true to their mission, all libraries must undergo radical change.

CD presents a collective approach that integrates national and global strategies to address the digital divide at home and abroad in that the issue is characterized as a part of broader developmental goals. Thus, when it comes to solutions, CD focuses more on collective government initiatives or national programs, with more emphasis on individual political figures like Chinese President Xi Jinping (10). CD stresses large-scale national efforts to improve digital infrastructure in schools across urban and rural areas (11), highlighting the Chinese government's vision and efforts of “shared prosperity” through digital growth. It centres more on government-led projects and public infrastructure development rather than the involvement of private companies, incarnating that the government is duty-bound to guarantee its people access to basic public services.

(10) In May 2017, during the opening ceremony of **the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation** in Beijing, **President Xi Jinping** highlighted the need for cooperation in **innovation-driven areas**, including the digital economy and artificial intelligence. These activities are parts of what he called **a Digital Silk Road for the 21st century**. Therefore, digital connectivity is often used to describe how China, through digital technology, can positively **promote global inclusive development**, especially in partner countries under the framework of **the Belt and Road Initiative**.

(11) According to the **2022 Government Work Report**, **China** will “advance the digitization of industries, and build smart cities and digital villages”, and progress is being made in this direction.

Another distinction is the attention paid to the social responsibilities of private companies, a theme that recurs frequently in CD. Of the 11 occurrences (“social responsibility”), all appear as an imperative incumbent upon private enterprises. Discursively, companies are positioned as agents, contributors, and protagonists of socially responsible action. The well-coordinated efforts are frequently articulated through references to willingness, a sense of urgency, commitment, and accommodation to national programs (12, 13).

(12) “We need to make breakthroughs in core technologies and let digital innovation go into all walks of life,” Ma said, adding his company is exploring how to use digital technology **to cross the digital divide and solve the problem of uneven development.**

(13) Zhou Yuan, founder and CEO of knowledge-sharing platform Zhihu, said his company has been inspired by **the call from the top leadership** to build a community with a shared future in cyberspace.

Distinct from the steady progress within long-term national development goals, CD underscores the immediate urgency for collaborative efforts among countries. When the Chinese perspective suggests a long-term vision for sustainable development that includes international collaboration “to build a digital world with shared interests and collective governance” (Ouyang et al. 2018), bridging the digital divide is represented as an opportunity for developing countries to take advantage of the technology to enhance their participation in the global economy, and avoid being left behind again (14).

(14) The fast-moving technology frontier **offers some developing countries the opportunity to leapfrog.** Going forward, the digital economy is potentially the largest and most important opportunity for dynamic change in sustainable development worldwide.

Evaluating the (Potential) Consequences

Another common theme of reports on the digital divide is from the consequence perspective. NYT tends to concretize impacts at the individual and community level, whereas CD abstracts consequences into collective, developmental terms, frequently pairing them with positive evaluations.

In NYT, consequences are typically rendered tangible through narrative specificity. For instance, when NYT points out that it is crucial to consider the broader societal context in which these issues are situated, its representation effectively concretizes the impacts on hindering personal development (15) and exacerbating existing inequalities (16).

(15) That enabled Mr. Creason and the 120 residents of Zena, Okla., **to pump high-speed internet service into their homes** for the first time.

(16) ...she spoke about the effects of remote learning on children in communities of colour, those who lacked resources and those without high-speed internet access — **an existing digital divide** that she said had widened into a **“digital canyon.”**

In (15), the agent “that” refers to a policy or infrastructure intervention previously mentioned. The verb “enabled” positions the intervention as a positive causal force, but the focus is on the outcome for specific people (“Mr. Creason and the 120 residents”) and a specific place (“Zena, Okla.”). The phrase “for the first time” represents the consequence as a long-awaited attainment, implying prior deprivation. Thus, the consequence—gaining internet access—is not left abstract, but it is embedded in a local, named community. In (16), the metaphor “digital canyon” intensifies the gravity of the consequence, evoking an impassable chasm. The evaluation is unambiguously

negative, and the affected group is specified (“children in communities of colour”). Across the NYT corpus, consequences are repeatedly tied to educational setbacks, employment barriers, and social mobility constraints, with direct citations of individual or community experiences.

In CD, the consequences cascade through nominalized abstractions, such as “prevent(ing) societies from harnessing the full benefits that digital technologies can deliver” (Wang 2018), and “do(ing) harm to financial inclusion, therefore hindering economic development and the improvement of people’s living standards” (Liu and Zhou 2018). Here, the consequence is a missed opportunity at the societal level. The verb “prevent” implies a causal barrier, but the agent of prevention is unspecified. The object of harm — “societies” — is abstract, and the benefit (“full benefits of digital technologies”) is presented as a given good. No specific community, individual, or location is named.

A great deal of positive evaluations of the consequences are observed in CD, specifically, of China’s success in narrowing the divide, while a significant number of negative consequences are represented in NYT. Scanning for emotional evaluations in NYT and CD gives us a contrastive attitude toward the consequences surrounding the digital divide. Grand positive evaluations frequently occur in CD, such as “an excellent example for other countries” (Wong 2020), and “‘very effective’ in empowering impoverished people and communities” (CD 2018). These evaluative phrases do not describe the harms of the digital divide but rather the positive outcomes of policies addressing it. The consequence of China’s approach, as represented in CD, is national and even global benefit. (17) is emblematic:

(17) China’s unique experience in dealing with the digital divide is important to the world, as the country has been **successful** in promoting the internet in less-developed areas and can bring that insight to other countries and economies, a veteran industry expert said.

Here, the consequence of China’s digital divide strategy is framed as “importance to the world” and a transferable “insight”. The stance is unequivocally positive, the agent is China as a nation-state, and the evaluation operates at a geopolitical scale. To further illustrate this asymmetry in evaluative stance, consider the use of stance adverbials such as *positively*. While such frequency counts are not themselves conclusive, the pattern is indicative: *positively* appears 37 times in the CD corpus but only 16 times in the NYT corpus. This distribution aligns with the broader contrast: CD evaluates consequences in aggregate and affirmative terms, while NYT evaluates them as concrete harms demanding urgent remedy.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings elucidate the conceptual framework and policy orientations embedded within news discourse, as well as the mutually constitutive relationship between news discourse and society. While the concept of the digital divide has evolved to provide a nuanced understanding of the changing digital sphere, media representations offer a comprehensive picture of its socially constructed reality across different national contexts. Academic research on the digital divide primarily centres around its definitions, causes and consequences (van Dijk 2020; Wei 2024). Similarly, the representations in NYT and CD approach the issue from these perspectives of defining the issues,

identifying the causes, interpreting the solutions, and evaluating the (potential) consequences, echoing to some extent existing academic paradigms.

Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction (Fairclough 2001). In NYT, the digital divide is represented as an everlasting domestic issue and a social inequality issue, possibly set up by partisan policymakers (Stevenson 2009). The NYT consistently critiques policy failures and the erosion of market competition in the United States, foregrounding the persistent incongruity between administrative intent and on-the-ground implementation as a key driver of entrenched inequality. From a policy perspective, there are other more important issues so that the digital divide is less a crisis than a temporary and normal process (Compaine 2001, 326; Greene 2016). Conversely, CD represents it as a universal issue about basic human rights or social equality, and a development challenge to be addressed especially in developing countries like China. Thus, in CD, as urgent developmental issues in other countries, the digital divide tends to be represented as more solvable through international cooperation than through unilateral action. While CD diverges from NYT in their representations of solutions, they agree on the significance of mitigating or eliminating the digital divide and acknowledge it as a barrier to economic and social participation. The divergent representations of the digital divide between NYT and CD largely echoed previous studies on political and economic factors (Carlson and Isaacs 2018).

Despite their divergent contexts, the media and the government are usually partners in shaping civil society (Luo 2015). Representations enter and shape social processes and practices (Fairclough 2001). A liberal, commercially oriented U.S. newspaper criticizes policy failures and emphasizes individual access, while a state-affiliated Chinese outlet highlights national progress and international cooperation. However, the contribution of this study lies not in confirming such expectations but in revealing three unanticipated patterns that complicate and refine existing theories of media and inequality.

First, while the NYT is often assumed to individualize social problems, a systematic analysis of the corpus shows that personalization coexists with sustained attention to structural factors. The newspaper routinely cites federal policy, municipal broadband, libraries, race, education, and low-income families as causal drivers. The distinction between personalization as a journalistic technique and individualization as an ideological displacement of structural responsibility is rarely theorized in comparative media research. This study operationalizes that distinction and demonstrates that NYT exhibits the former but not the latter, a finding that challenges the common critique of U.S. media as uniformly individualizing.

Second, CD's coverage, despite its state-affiliated character, is not monolithic. The analysis reveals internal tensions: while CD consistently praises China's policy achievements, it also acknowledges persistent domestic gaps and, in its reporting on other developing countries, adopts a critical stance toward global power asymmetries. This dual orientation—affirmative at home, critical abroad—has received little attention in existing literature. Theoretically, it suggests that state media can strategically modulate causal attribution depending on the geopolitical representations of the issue, a nuance lost in studies that treat state media as merely propagandistic.

Third, the comparison uncovers unexpected convergences. Despite their institutional asymmetries, both newspapers rely on a shared set of discursive strategies: personalization (NYT) and state-led affirmation (CD) are not mutually exclusive. Both employ future-oriented rhetoric and technological solutionism. This convergence challenges a simplistic dichotomy and points to a global journalistic logic that cuts across media systems when reporting on techno-social issues. Specifically, both newspapers represent the digital divide

as a problem amenable to policy intervention, although they differ sharply on which actors bear responsibility and what counts as evidence of progress.

The digital divide is a complex and dynamic phenomenon (van Dijk and Hacker 2003). The number of newspapers examined is limited due to a narrow keyword strategy centred on the term “digital divide”. NYT and CD are institutionally distinct: the former is mainly commercially driven, while the latter is, to some extent, state affiliated. The foregrounded discourses are compared, but a deeper critical analysis of discursive omissions is an important area for future research. This asymmetry, rather than a flaw, is a productive condition for comparison, but it requires deeper theorization. No corpus is fully representative of the language as a whole, or even a subset thereof (Partington 2003). The steady decline of public trust in the mainstream news media was just beginning to take hold (Firmstone 2024, 3), which may influence reporting styles. Future studies should include a larger host of newspapers, perhaps incorporating user-generated contents from social media, coupled with considering the cultural systems, journalistic norms, and news values that shape representations of digital inequality across different political and economic settings. Last but not the least, the 10-year period (January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2023) of the dataset span encompasses massive technological, political, and social shifts, which fundamentally altered global discourse around broadband access, remote learning, and the digital divide, so a diachronic discourse analysis could help to unveil how representations evolve over time in response to major real-world events.

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