

People's Daily and the WTO

- Reality or propaganda?

- A quantitative and qualitative study of People's Daily's coverage of China's accession to the WTO

Introduction

In the autumn of 2001 it was impossible to stay in China without hearing or reading about China's forthcoming accession to the WTO. WTO was mentioned in every newspaper and magazine, you couldn't enter a bookstore without seeing a pile of new books about the topic or watch the news without hearing about it. Some of the topics that were mentioned in relation to the WTO seemed to have very little or nothing to do with the forthcoming accession, which is why I have chosen to focus on People's Daily's coverage of the event. People's Daily was chosen because it's not only the newspaper available in most parts of the country, it's also the official party organ publishing news according to the Party's official guidelines.

The goal of the paper is to examine how the accession was covered by People's Daily. The material used for the analysis are all texts mentioning WTO that were published in People's Daily during the periods November 5th to 17th and December 5th to 17th 2001. First in a quantitative analysis to see how much coverage the topic got, which categories of news it was related to and so forth. The goal of the qualitative analysis is to examine what People's Daily told the public about the WTO and the consequences of China's accession. The qualitative analysis will be divided into four sub-categories, which all will compare the coverage in People's Daily with Western observers' view on the topic. The four sub-categories are:

1. The description of the WTO.
2. The expected influence of the accession on China's national economy
3. The expected influence of the accession on world economy
4. The expected social consequences of the accession

The quantitative analysis

As mentioned earlier the material used for the quantitative analysis is from two periods. The first period covers the days around the signing of the accession protocol (November 5th to November 17th 2001) and the second period covers the days around the implementation of the protocol (December 5th to December 17th 2001). All texts mentioning WTO in these periods are represented in the quantitative analysis. All information have been found manually in the printed version of People's Daily why the quantitative analysis is suspected to have a +/- 5% accuracy.

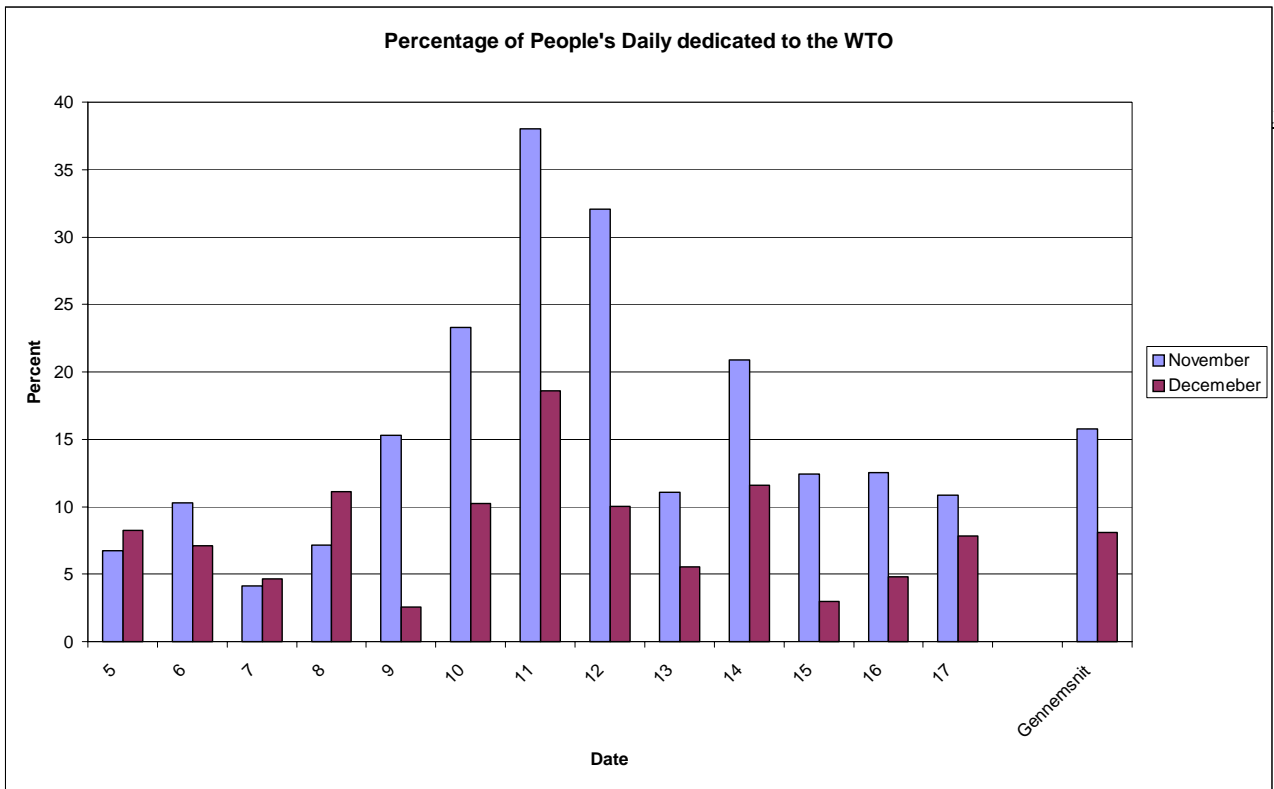
Similarly to the qualitative analysis the quantitative analysis is also divided into sub-categories:

1. How much space did People's Daily dedicate to China's accession to the WTO?
2. Who wrote the texts mentioning WTO?
3. Under which categories of news was WTO mentioned?

How much space did People's Daily dedicate to China's accession to the WTO?

I realized that simply counting the number of texts mentioning the WTO wasn't going to give an accurate picture of how much space the People's Daily had dedicated to China's accession to the WTO. In order to give the most accurate picture of how much space People's Daily dedicated to China's accession to the WTO, I therefore measured the size of each text mentioning WTO and calculated the percentage of the paper dedicated to the event. Due to the fact that the number of pages in the news paper varies from day to day depending on the amount of news and whether or not one of the weekly supplements are published that day, the percentage had to be calculated for each day in the two periods. The results are shown below in diagram n° 1.

Diagram n° 1:



The diagram indicates that the coverage of China's accession to the WTO in People's Daily has followed the normal pattern of news coverage in both periods: the amount of news slowly rises from the beginning of the period in order to culminate with the highest amount of news just around the day of the event and then the amount of news decrease due to the topic's falling news value. Normally the peak point of the news coverage would be expected to be on the day following the event due to the fact that printed media cannot cover news simultaneously with them taking place. Printed media can either describe what is expected to happen prior to the event or report what actually took place during the event.

In November 2001, the amount of texts mentioning the WTO reached its peak on the day of the signing-ceremony, where no less than 38 % of People's Daily was dedicated to the event, background information and so forth. This gives us an inaccurate picture of the actual news coverage of the topic. Although People's Daily on November 11th 2001 did dedicated the highest percentage of its space on the event, the highest amount of square cm used on the topic was published in People's Daily on November 12th 2001. Therefore the normal pattern of news coverage was actually followed in this case.

When comparing the two periods it is clear that the news value of the topic has fallen from November to December 2001. In December the peak of the coverage amounted to 18 % of the paper dedicated to the topic, which is less than half of what was used one month earlier. Again the peak fell one day earlier than expected according to the normal pattern but this time it was not only the

percentage of the paper but also the amount of square cm used on the topic that peaked that day. This can be explained by the fact that on December 11th the protocol was to be implemented which didn't claim a ceremony or likewise, it was simply a fact that was being carried out, so there wasn't much to report the following day.

All in all People's Daily's coverage of China's accession to the WTO have not shown any great deviations from the normal pattern of news coverage. Due to the enormous amount of attention given to the topic at the time in China, I would have expected to see a much more constant coverage of the event. Meaning that I expected to see a fairly identical amount of space used on the WTO every day during at least the first period. Since this didn't take place and given the fact that the coverage in People's Daily did follow the normal pattern of news coverage for printed media, one must conclude - when only looking at the quantity and not the quality of the news coverage - that there are no indications of People's Daily haven abused it's position as the party organ by for instance massively giving information on the topic in order to augment the public interest.

There is not enough time to go through the other two sub-categories the same way, so I will just quickly give a short resume of what I found out.

Who wrote the texts mentioning WTO?

When looking at the origin of the texts published in the two periods there are little difference between the periods. Most of the texts – around 55 % of them - are written by People's Daily's regular reporters.

Around 8 to 12 % of the texts are from the Chinese news agency Xinhua, which means that these texts have not only occurred in People's Daily but most likely in almost every news paper in the country and maybe even in some foreign news papers. The texts delivered by Xinhua are under more Party control than the texts written by People's Daily's regular reporters.

People's Daily has also used guest-reporters to write about the event. Between 9 and 15 % of the texts are written by non-journalists who have been invited to write in the paper. Most of these guest-reporters are mentioned by name and working title, representing army officials, scientists, economists and so forth.

None of the above mentioned text-sources can be said to be surprising, newspapers all over the world gather information from staff-reporters, news agencies and guest- or freelance-reporters. What might come as a surprise is the fact, that between 8 and 15 % of the texts have no indications revealing their author. And another 5 to 12 % of the texts are actually commercials mentioning the WTO. Foreign companies congratulating China on its accession to the WTO make most of these commercials.

Once again the study showed that when it came to the origin of the texts mentioning the WTO in People's Daily there didn't seem to be much deviation from what could be considered normal newspaper behavior.

Under which categories of news was WTO mentioned?

Chinese newspapers don't have different sections for different newscategories such as "sports" or "international". In stead every page has a heading with the current page's newscategory, this means that several newscategories are possible even though the paper don't have multiple sections.

During the first period WTO was mentioned under 19 different newscategories while it during the second period was mentioned under 24 different newscategories. Only 15 of the categories were represented in both periods meaning that in total WTO has been mentioned under 28 different newscategories. These newscategories covered a diversity of topics going from "health" via "computers and communication" to "national economy". This shows People's Daily's ability to connect WTO and China's accession to many different walks of life. Apparently this is not done solely by People's Daily but also but the common Chinese. According to China's fourth and last WTO chief negotiator the two biggest concerns of the common Chinese at the time of the accession was whether it would be cheapest to buy a car before or after the accession and whether or not the price on Chinese cabbage would go up after China's accession¹.

It seems surprising that the WTO has been connected to so many newscategories, but when looking at the amount of texts under each category the outcome is more or less as could be expected. The WTO has mostly been mentioned at the front-page and under newscategories related to international affairs, economy and general news.

¹ Long Yongtu in *Xinmin weekly* November 2001 (di 46 qi) p.9

Summary and conclusion of the quantitative analysis

The study of the percentage of People's Daily dedicated to the WTO showed that WTO had gotten a lot (more than 20 % of the total) of coverage in the days around the signing-ceremony, whereas the coverage the rest of the two periods was lower. This cannot be considered as being unusual. When looking at the origins of the texts the only surprise seemed to be that 5 to 12 % of the texts weren't newsrelated but simple commercials mentioning the WTO. Finally the study of the newscategories to which WTO had been connected didn't reveal any stunning news either. The WTO had been connected to many different newscategories but when looking more closely the main topics were related to economy, international affairs and news as could have been expected.

All in all I must say, that the quantitative analysis showed, that when looking at the quantity and not the quality the coverage of China's accession to the WTO by People's Daily didn't show any signs of not following normal newspaper procedures. Therefore the quantity cannot show us whether People's Daily's coverage of the accession is reality or propaganda. One can just hope that the quantitative analysis will give more accurate results as to show whether People's Daily is open-minded enough to keep to the facts and reflect the reality or if the newspaper conceals or leaves out certain facts, which distorts the picture and makes it look more like propaganda less like reality.