



Framing Violence: US and Chinese State-Funded News Outlets during the Hong Kong Protests

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A large, light gray stylized sunburst graphic is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the text. It consists of a central circle and several radiating triangular rays of varying lengths.

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ABSTRACT

State-funded news media outlets and the ways in which they convey the messages of government and government-affiliated officials represent an essential but under-emphasized area of study in the realm of international diplomacy. Through a case study of the Hong Kong protests of 2019, this paper draws on theories from journalism and public diplomacy to analyze articles by state-funded media covering the unrest. This paper argues that the state-funded news outlets of the US and China used the same frame—violence and conflict—but approached the Hong Kong protests differently. Using this frame, state media outlets made themselves channels for government officials during the US-China rivalry, but made different arguments regarding the violence that occurred there. While US government-funded media focused on the violence of the Hong Kong Police Force as a danger to the territory’s democracy, Chinese state media emphasized the violence of the Hong Kong protestors as a danger to national security.

Introduction

On March 15, 2019, the Hong Kong pro-democracy group Demosisto held a sit-in movement at the Central Government Complex to protest against the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019. The bill (henceforth referred to as the “extradition bill”), which would have allowed for those wanted for a range of offenses in Hong Kong to be extradited to mainland China, Taiwan, or Macau, would inspire numerous pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong to protest against the bill in the coming months. This movement gradually attracted more public attention, eventually inspiring more people from outside the pro-democracy bloc to join. In mid-June 2019, when a huge number of people gathered in Victoria Park in Hong Kong, the police estimated 338,000¹ people attended at its peak, while other sources estimate the attendance as even higher. Soon the protests would escalate, turning into violent clashes between black-clad, masked protesters and the Hong Kong Police Force, receiving worldwide attention.

After the first demonstration in Victoria Park, the Hong Kong protests emerged as a systematic movement protesting the Chinese government. Hong Kong protesters organized marches against not only the Chinese government’s security law but also for full democracy in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). Ever since the start of the protests, various global news media outlets have analyzed the triggering events, relaying protestors’ and mainland Chinese voices to a global audience. Soon, news media outlets from all over the world would report on the protests in a variety of ways. In this process, the US and the Chinese government used their state-funded news outlets to deliver messages favoring their interests and designed to influence how foreign audiences perceive and process the protests. Specifically, *China Daily*, a state-run newspaper in China, reported that the demonstrations were a result of foreign interference, accusing foreign forces of creating chaos in Hong Kong, while Voice of America (VOA), a US government-funded outlet broadcasting in more than 40 languages, depicted the protests as a means to democracy, condemning the police for the use of excessive force to suppress democracy.

State news media reports on the Hong Kong protests differ from that of private news media outlets. Specifically, while VOA and *China Daily* only quote their governments during their coverage on the Hong Kong protests, private news enterprises describe the protests and its related violence in a relatively neutral way. For instance, CNN, a private news outlet, might report on the protests in such a way that the audience, without prior knowledge, could understand what has been going on in Hong Kong. They explained² Hong Kong’s judicial system, the controversy over the extradition bill, and the protests, citing both US and Chinese sources. They also quote government officials from other countries like the UK so that their audience could understand the context and background of the protests. But by quoting one’s government officials only, government-funded news outlets specifically report the perspective of the government they represent.

¹ “Hong Kong protest: ‘Nearly two million’ join demonstration.” *BBC*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48656471> (accessed May 23, 2021).

² Tara John, “Why Hong Kong is protesting: Their five demands listed.” *CNN*, Aug 30, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/13/asia/hong-kong-airport-protest-explained-hnk-intl/index.html>.

This paper explores the coverage of US and Chinese state-funded news enterprises and their frames. Based on framing theory and categorizations of news frames, this research assesses how VOA and *China Daily* frame the protests for their countries' interests. "Framing" here refers to "persistent patterns of information presentation based on selection, emphasis, or exclusion through which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse."³ Through examining the use of frames, this paper investigates the narratives of state-funded news media organizations. Using online VOA and *China Daily* articles about the Hong Kong protests uploaded on their English websites, the study conducts a content analysis to analyze what narratives they embed in their coverage.

To gain an understanding of the US and Chinese views on the Hong Kong protests, it is useful to analyze articles published on US and Chinese state news media outlets. Considering that those state news media outlets are funded by their governments, it is rational to surmise the perspectives of the US and Chinese governments toward the Hong Kong demonstrations, where people protested for democracy in an authoritarian environment.

This research will help address how state media enterprises function in public diplomacy. Compared to private news media organizations that do not have direct ties to their governments and produce fairly balanced coverage of international issues, state-funded media are often criticized for presenting and delivering narratives that speak to their home countries' interests.

Framing the Hong Kong Protests

This paper explores how the interests of the US and China during the Hong Kong protests are expressed through the journalistic news frames employed by state-funded news enterprises. Journalistic news frames refer to the frames that "play a transformative role vis-à-vis frames sponsored by (political) elites."⁴ The journalistic frame emphasizes certain parts of an issue, highlighting the active role of journalists in constructing news stories. The decisions of journalists on what to include or exclude and what to emphasize vary a great deal depending on journalists and their organizations.

In the context of an international conflict, state news media outlets have become an important tool to promote ideas and political agendas to overseas audiences, thus creating a hospitable atmosphere. Creating a friendly atmosphere in foreign countries is crucial because it can influence how overseas audiences perceive and process international issues when a conflict occurs. State news media outlets use journalistic frames to define and explain issues so that they can shape the opinions of foreign audiences in a way critical to the interests of the transmitting country.

Information released by state news media is helpful to understand how an issue is diagnosed and how news organizations present selected information with a specific emphasis or exclusion. According to one study, state-owned media can serve as a "political public relations tool" that

³ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

⁴ Claes H. de Vreese, "Mediatization of News: The Role of Journalistic Framing," in *Mediatization of News*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.), 137-155.

can facilitate government-led communication activity “to influence foreign public’s perception of issues.”⁵

The study by Zhang et al, which examined the effectiveness of state media from the perspective of agenda-building, suggests that “news about a foreign country’s political issues is central to the relational ideological band among the countries” and “state media align with their government on their interpretation of foreign political issues regardless of whether they have press freedom.”⁶ Based on Zhang et al.’s findings, one could expect the global competition between the US and China to influence the coverage of VOA and *China Daily* regarding the Hong Kong protests.

Articles regarding the Hong Kong protests are mostly reported in two ways: legitimate protests for a democratic process of law enforcement or a violent and illegal movement against a lawful administration. Outlets aligned with the US government perspective describe the protests as a legitimate demonstration organized by ordinary Hong Kong citizens, while Chinese-back media enterprises have emphasized the violence and chaos that occurred because of the protesters, describing the violence as the result of foreign interference. The disparities in the narratives are due to the different information selected. While some enterprises focus on the violent side of a demonstration, others emphasize how the protests are essential for democracy in Hong Kong.

Examples of Journalistic Frames

A review of the literature on the most-used forms of journalistic framing reveals four primary frames: 1) episodic and human-interest framing, 2) conflict and competitive framing, 3) economic consequences framing and 4) strategy and game framing.⁷ Research has shown that they have been widely found in media content analyses around the world.⁸

1. Episodic and Human-Interest Framing

Human interest framing “brings a human face or an emotional angle to the demonstration of an event, issue, or problem”⁹ and the episodic frame is very similar. The episodic frame displays human examples of larger political issues.¹⁰ Both use and emphasize personal descriptions by people concerned with or interested in an issue.¹¹

⁵ Tianduo Zhang, Ji Young Kim, Tiffany L. Mohr, Barbara A. Myslik, Liudmila Khalitova, Guy J. Golan, & Spiro Kioussis, “Agenda-Building role of state-owned media around the world: 2014 Hong Kong protest case,” *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 29(5). (2017): 238-254. doi: 10.1080/1062726x.2017.1396988.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Claes H. de Vreese, “Mediatization of News: The Role of Journalistic Framing,” in *Mediatization of News*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.), 137-155.

⁸ Catherine A. Luther, & Xiang Zhou. “Within the Boundaries of Politics: News Framing of SARS in China and the United States,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4). (2005): 857-872.

⁹ Holli A. Semetko, & Patti M. Valkenburg. “Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News,” *Journal of Communication*, 50(2). (2000): 93-109.

¹⁰ Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹¹ Hans-Bernd Brosius, “Exemplars in the News: A Theory of the Effects of Political Communication,” in *Communication and Emotion: Essays in Honor of Dolf Zillmann*, ed. Jennings Bryant, David Roskos-Ewoldsen and Joanne Cantor (New York: Routledge, 2003) 179-194.

2. Conflict and Competitive Framing

Conflict and competitive framing focus on conflicts and disagreements among individuals, groups, and countries.¹² Previous studies have found that this was the second most common news frame.¹³

3. Economic Consequences Framing

This frame demonstrates an event or issue in terms of economic consequences for entities such as groups, organizations, or countries.¹⁴

4. Strategy and Game Framing

Strategy and game framings are distinct from each other. Strategy framing refers to “news stories that are centered around interpretations of candidates’ motives for actions and positions,”¹⁵ while game framing refers to “news stories that portray politics as a game and are centered around: who is winning or losing elections in the battle for public opinion or in politics in general.”¹⁶

State-Funded Media Outlets in the United States and China

As diplomatic tools, VOA and *China Daily* strive to provide information that favors the governments they represent and transmits their views and policies. The use of state news media enterprises for such purposes is not new; it has existed in different forms since World War I. State media outlets were originally called international broadcasting, as they circulated the information favoring the interests of their country to foreign public through television and radio. The role of international broadcasting in public diplomacy began as a form widely known as “propaganda.”¹⁷ From the beginning of World War I until the decline of Soviet Union, the ability to generate a friendly public opinion while demonizing an opposing regime was desirable and widely used. It was a vital and effective way of winning the war by controlling the public opinion in foreign countries. For instance, the British government used to generate an amicable American public opinion for entering World War I.¹⁸ During World War II, the United States government used various forms of media such as radio, cartoons, and posters to negatively

¹² Claes H. de Vreese, “Mediatization of News: The Role of Journalistic Framing,” in *Mediatization of News*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.), 137-155.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Toril Aalberg, Jesper Strömbäck, & Claes H. de Vreese. “The Framing of Politics as Strategy and Game: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings,” *Journalism*, 13(2), (2012): 162–178.

¹⁷ Gary D. Rawnsley. *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956-64*. (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1996).

¹⁸ Nicholas John Cull. *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American “Neutrality” in World War II*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

describe the Nazi regime¹⁹ and government-initiated radio broadcast in multiple languages to assert control over the war narrative.²⁰

The use of state media was especially prevalent during the Cold War. Nelson offers evidence that the dominance of US radio stations played an effective role in the Soviet Union's decline.²¹ Efforts to deliver and broadcast a country's policies or ideas through state media were essential until the end of the Cold War. Contemplating the history of modern war, state media outlets were widely used by various governments to voice and broadcast policies and ideas to foreign audiences as a public diplomatic tool. However, one criticism that state-owned media outlets receive is that they exist in an environment where states can exercise a "chilling degree of scrutiny and coercion over private broadcasters."²² Rapid technological advancements have allowed international broadcasters to distribute information through various channels, including online and through social media. This has made the distribution of information easier, allowing state news media could reach and engage foreign audiences.

The history of VOA traces back to World War II. Established by the Office of War Information, VOA began broadcasting to fight against the Nazi regime and its propaganda. After the War, along with other US information agency programs such as Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, and Radio Liberty, US state news outlets serve as diplomatic tools that promotes national interests "in accordance with the broad foreign policy objective of the United States."²³ VOA "presents a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought, the policies of the United States and responsible discussions and opinion on these policies."²⁴

The Chinese government established *China Daily* in 1981 for foreigners in China. *China Daily* targets foreigners, tourists, and diplomats to inform them of Chinese government policies and the positions of the Chinese Communist Party. *China Daily* is funded and controlled by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party. Considering that *China Daily* is controlled by the Communist Party, exploring the articles of *China Daily* is helpful to infer the perspectives of the Chinese government. Tight censorship and bias in the process of selective reporting of issues and events in the realm of international affairs imply to what extent Chinese journalists are allowed to report about the demonstrations in Hong Kong. This suggests that the articles published on *China Daily* are within the boundaries of the Chinese Communist Party's guidelines.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Becker, "A Nation Challenged Hearts and Minds – A Special Report; In the War on Terrorism, A Battle to Shape Opinion," *New York Times*, November 11, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/11/us/nation-challenged-hearts-minds-special-report-war-terrorism-battle-shape-opinion.html>.

²⁰ Philip M. Taylor. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003).

²¹ Michael Nelson. *War and the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997).

²² Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman, *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*. (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2003).

²³ "United States Agency for Global Media." USAGM. Accessed May 24, 2021. <http://www.usagm.gov/networks/voa/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

Methodology

This study utilizes content analysis to examine articles regarding the Hong Kong protests from two state-funded media outlets: Voice of America and *China Daily*, the most famous state-funded news organizations in their respective countries. Content analysis can determine “the presence of certain themes or concepts within given qualitative data.”²⁵ Conducting content analysis allows one to evaluate how words are used within news articles and researchers can infer what the messages within the texts suggest.²⁶

Content analysis was used to investigate the news coverage of VOA and *China Daily* from between March 15, 2019, when the first demonstration against the extradition bill started, until Nov. 23, 2019, a month after the bill was officially withdrawn by the Hong Kong administration. These dates were selected because it was a period of time when the Hong Kong protests gathered tremendous attention from all over the world. This time period encompasses a series of demonstrations, mostly organized by college students in Hong Kong, and the aftermath of the withdrawal of the official legislation bill. The ending period is especially important because it examines the reactions of state media outlets after the withdrawal.

Articles were retrieved via Google News, and a total of 478 articles mentioning the Hong Kong protests were collected: 178 articles from Voice of America and 300 articles from *China Daily*. Notably, *China Daily* produced more articles than Voice of America. However, most of the articles published by *China Daily* discuss how well the Hong Kong police force²⁷ behaved in face of the protests and opinion pieces that postulate²⁸ on the prospective future of Hong Kong, rather than describing or explaining the situation itself.

Due to this, 248 articles (64 from VOA, 184 from *China Daily*) out of 478 articles were removed because they did not explicitly relate to the Hong Kong protests. Specifically, *China Daily*'s articles about the Hong Kong Police Force and the future of Hong Kong were omitted, along with some VOA articles. The deleted VOA articles were those that mainly reported on the reactions of the protests in foreign countries, such as United Kingdom,²⁹ as well as the United Nations.³⁰ Thus, the final sample that the study examined was 114 articles from Voice of America and 116 from *China Daily*, or a total of 230.

²⁵ Columbia Public Health, “Content Analysis,” Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, Accessed May 23, 2021. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “HK Police, we support you!” *China Daily*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/15/WS5d54ab23a310cf3e35565d31.html> (accessed May 23, 2021).

²⁸ Laurence Brahm, “Hong Kong remains unique and continues to offer a future,” *China Daily*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/21/WS5d5cdfc8a310cf3e355670e7.html>.

²⁹ Jamie Dettmer, “Who Will Britain Side with on Hong Kong Protests?” *Voice of America*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/who-will-britain-side-hong-kong-protests>.

³⁰ Margaret Besheer, “UN Chief Urges Leaders to Listen to Their Disconnected Citizens,” *Voice of America*, Oct 25, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/un-chief-urges-leaders-listen-their-discontented-citizens>.

Results

After collecting 230 articles, the headlines and first three paragraphs were analyzed to determine their characterizing frame. It is possible for articles to carry two different frames, but the study decided to identify one primary frame presented in the first three paragraphs of an article. In doing so, the paper identified three reoccurring themes in the articles published by VOA and *China Daily*. Below is the list of the themes identified.

1) Conflict and Competitive Framing (Total 124: VOA 53; *China Daily* 71)

Articles in this category discuss how the protests were carried out in the realm of violence and politics. This category includes articles that mentioned the influence of the protests on the political system of Hong Kong and how the protests affected the political agenda of the Chinese government. In addition, the articles specifically focused on whether or not the protests were a peaceful movement, providing detailed information on the behavior and actions of demonstrators and law enforcement units. Details included the legality of the protests and if violations of laws or injuries took place during the protests, demonstrating how disagreements are present among Hong Kong citizens, the Chinese government, and the US government.

2) Economic Consequences Frame (Total 57: VOA 26; *China Daily* 31)

Articles here examined the economic impact of the Hong Kong protests. They detailed how the protests have influenced the social structure and lives of Hong Kong residents and, most importantly, the loss of Hong Kong's special status, resulting in Hong Kong being treated the same as mainland China. Also, the articles included details on the consequences of the protests such as reduced tourism, property damage, and the implications of US sanctions in the realm of economics.

3) Episodic & Human Interests frame (Total 49: VOA 35; *China Daily* 14)

Articles in this category describe the reactions of governments from all over the world, along with specific stories of individuals and organizations such as activists, celebrities, and universities. Government officials, activists, and celebrities around the world described the positions of their governments, whether they support the demonstrations or not. While a significant number of articles in the category include official quotes from government or international organization officers, especially from the US and China, other stories include how the universities in Hong Kong reacted to the demonstrations and the requests of Hong Kong activists for international help during the crisis.

Journalistic Frames for National Interests

For the most frequently used frames, findings reveal that the majority content of both VOA and *China Daily* contained the conflict frame that highlighted the violence that happened during the protests. However, the approaches of VOA and *China Daily* toward the protests were different. VOA focused more on how the police violently suppressed the demonstration while *China Daily* emphasized the threat and chaos posed by the demonstrations and acts of vandalism. This can be seen in the articles describing the confrontation between the protestors

and law enforcement units at Polytechnic University. VOA reported that the police had used tear gas and water cannons aimed at students and described the university as a battleground where “the students and police have engaged in intense but sporadic clashes.”³¹ However, the coverage of *China Daily* about the university campuses was totally different. In the articles, *China Daily* justified the use of force by reporting the case of a Hong Kong police officer injured by an arrow at Polytechnic University, calling the protesters “radical.”³² Given that the articles of the state-funded media outlets used the same frame, yet taking a different approach shows that VOA and *China Daily* frame the issue for their interests.

The findings display that the economic frame was the second most common frame in the coverage of the Hong Kong protests when VOA and *China Daily* are tallied together—though VOA used the episodic and human interest frame slightly more, but *China Daily*’s use of the economic frame more than doubled that of its use of the episodic and human interest frame. This particular frame examined both sociological and economic consequences of the demonstrations. However, the articles published by VOA emphasized the sociological side of the demonstration more than *China Daily*’s reports, which mostly analyzed the negative economic consequences such as the damages on Hong Kong’s special status. One interesting finding is that *China Daily* reports how Hong Kong will remain positive and prosperous, as it previously was, despite the ongoing protests.

Other frames such as strategy are also common frames in the articles of VOA and *China Daily*. Those frames are used to describe personal stories during the demonstrations. They mainly focused on the details of the demonstrations, providing specific information such as the responses from all over the world, what persons were involved in the demonstrations, and how the demonstrations impacted the political agenda of the US and Chinese governments.

Discussion

This paper assesses what frames were most frequently used in articles describing Hong Kong protests and how state-funded news enterprises frame the protests for their interests. The findings suggest that although VOA and *China Daily* used the same frames, news enterprises take different approaches due to their interests. The results also reveal that both VOA and *China Daily* quote their own government to counter the narratives of opponents. Understanding the journalistic frames used by VOA and *China Daily* during the Hong Kong protests helps to explore other relatable perceptions and see the issues in a larger context.

Both US and Chinese state news media coverage voiced the position of their government by frequently quoting government officials, as opposed to other sources. VOA reports contained quotes of government officials who negatively described the violence of law enforcement entities as a threat to Hong Kong’s democracy whereas *China Daily* cited Chinese government officials who depicted the violence of demonstrators as a consequence of foreign interference to national security.

³¹ William Gallo, “Polytechnic University President Urges Hong Kong Protesters to Leave.” *Voice of America*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/polytechnic-university-president-urges-hong-kong-protesters-leave>.

³² “Police media officer injured by arrow fired by rioters” *China Daily*, November 17, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/17/WS5dd0fcbfa310cf3e35577df8.html> (accessed May 23, 2021).

VOA and *China Daily* took different approaches to frame the protests for their interests. VOA focused on the violence of the law enforcement units while the articles written by *China Daily* mostly talked about the violence of the demonstrators. From this, the paper concludes that the emphasis on the violence can be different depending on the interests of the state-funded news enterprises.

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