The dichotomy of China Global Television Network's news coverage

Abstract: Although much is made of the universalisation of 'US-style' journalism around the world and Chinese journalists' shared professional values with counterparts in liberal-democratic countries (Zhang, 2009), the effect of these trends on journalism in China is yet to be fully explored. Using the 2015 Tianjin blasts as a case study, this article investigates China Global Television Network (CGTN) and CNN International's coverage of the disaster. The empirical study finds that despite their overlapping news values, the two networks' opposing ideological objectives contributed to different framings of the Tianjin blasts. Although CGTN, as a symbol of Chinese media's presence on the world stage, has clearly travelled far from its past era of party-line journalism, it still hesitates to apportion responsibility to those in power. The authors argue that CGTN is increasingly torn by its dichotomous role as a credible media competing for audience attention on the world stage, and a vital government propaganda organ domestically.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, China, CGTN, CNN, comparative journalism, disaster communication, framing analysis, media convergence, propaganda, satellite news, soft power, television, Tianjin, watchdog

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COMMUNICATION scholars recognise the mass media's capability to serve as a key channel for disseminating information about disasters (Lowrey et al., 2007; Tulloch & Zinn, 2011). Media audiences expect accurate, timely, and trustworthy information to make considered decisions about their personal safety. In contrast, inaccurate, incomplete, or sensational news coverage can contribute to the public's misunderstanding of risks (Lowrey et al., 2007). In an interconnected world, the proliferation of 24-hour satellite news channels has given viewers unprecedented choice in terms of where they

get their news. Different journalism styles characterised by broader political perspectives are collectively reshaping the global news agenda (Lavelle, 2014). Spearheading this shift is China, where significant investment has expanded its international media operations in contrast to the downsizing occurring in many Western countries (Cai, 2016, p. 109).

China's national broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), launched its English-language satellite news channel CCTV International in May 2004 (Jirik, 2016). In April 2010, the channel was rebranded as CCTV News and expanded to include affiliates CCTV America and CCTV Africa (CCTV, 2010). Its most recent relaunch occurred on 31 December 2016, when CCTV News was rebranded as China Global Television Network (CGTN) to consolidate its worldwide reach (Associated Press, 2016) and 'cope with the global trend in media convergence' (CGTN, 2017). CGTN has a complex dual mission: to become a globally credible media organisation, while sustaining its role as a vital government propaganda organ (Associated Press, 2016).

CGTN is an instrument of 'soft power' used by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to advance state-led public diplomacy (Bandurski, 2017). Nye (2004) says 'soft power' is a country's ability to influence others through intangible resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. He has argued that, at times, 'soft power' is more important than 'hard power' (i.e. economic and military prowess) in postmodern international relations. However, doubts have been raised over the effectiveness of Chinese media organisations as vehicles of 'soft power'. In studying Chinese media's impact in South Africa, Wasserman (2016, p. 18) notes such organisations have struggled to win 'hearts and minds' of local audiences because state controls undermine their journalistic credibility. Foreign journalists have also expressed distrust and criticism toward Chinese counterparts, noting their reports are useful for an 'inside view' but mostly 'inconsistent with the reality in China' (Wasserman, 2016, p. 17).

On the one hand, the rise of CGTN is seen as the realisation of former propaganda chief Li Changchun's vision in 2003 to create 'China's CNN' (Jirik, 2009, p. 10). To this end, CGTN has succeeded in terms of optics; it shares international norms of satellite news production including a catchy promotional slogan ('see the difference'), seemingly impartial content, and a team of reputable foreign newscasters (Dunbar, 2017). On the other hand, CGTN's 'soft-power' influence is limited by its news content that prioritises party interests (Ide, 2012). CGTN staff have noted the channel must 'work harder than other networks' to build credibility (Powell, 2015). However, media observers argue CGTN remains ideologically unchanged from its predecessor CCTV News as demonstrated by its continued adherence to party press principles (Lopez, 2017) that reflect the 'correct political direction' and 'correct guidance of public opinion' (Bandurski, 2017).

Nevertheless, Chinese media remains a diverse and dynamic entity. As of July

2012, there were 1,918 newspapers and 2,185 television stations (Zhou, 2015, p. 59). Globalisation of Chinese television has diversified news content and formats, reflected by CGTN's programming and digital expansion. Professional norms have diversified, too, causing tension between market orientation and control by the party-state (Hong & Liu, 2015, p. 443) as more Chinese journalists base their reporting on 'social responsibility' and 'revealing truth' principles (Tong, 2014, p. 133). It is in this context we use a comparative content analysis of a breaking/disaster news story in China to examine CCTV's domestic news coverage and analyse the impact of internationalisation of the Chinese television network on its domestic performance where it competes with both national and international media such as CNN International. We argue that CGTN is increasingly torn by its dichotomous role as a 'watchdog' in society and as a 'guard dog' of the party-state, which is intensified by its global expansion.

Reporting disasters

Disasters present significant challenges for Chinese journalists. Their responsibility to promote national unity after a disaster is a legacy of Maoist disaster management that continues today (Paltemaa, 2016, p. 189). Tianjin is considered one of the country's most rapidly advancing areas for industrial and financial activity, with about 285 *Fortune* Global 500 companies operating in the city's Binhai region where the blasts occurred (Marinelli, 2015). About midnight on 12 August 2015, two explosions ripped through a hazardous chemical storage facility in Tianjin, a port city in northern China. The final death toll of the disaster was listed at 173, including more than 100 police officers and firefighters (Associated Press, 2015). The blasts were an international media event that caused political and social debate in China. The private company that owned the destroyed facility, Ruihai International Logistics, was subsequently found to have used its political connections to circumvent safety regulations. According to an offical investigation, the blasts were caused by the ignition of hazardous materials improperly or illegally stored at the warehouse (Xinhua, 2016). The company's chairman, Yu Xuewei, was given a suspended death sentence for his role in the disaster, while 25 officials and 11 people employed by a company that issued fake licences to the company were jailed (Connor, 2016).

Following the Tianjin blasts on 12 August 2015, the Chinese government continued its pattern of controlling information on traditional and social media (Dou, 2015). This research explores ways in which CGTN facilitated nation-building and yet adhered to traditional journalistic values of accuracy, objectivity and public accountability (*The Rundown* 2012). Using a content analysis of two weeks' news coverage after the event (13 to 27 August, 2015), this research identifies similarities and differences in CGTN and CNN International's coverage of the disaster. It also explores how both channels' shared news values were used

to uphold contradictory perspectives of journalists' role in disaster reporting. This research compares CGTN and CNN International's coverage of the disaster to examine their framing strategies. News frame analysis is a broad theoretical approach used in communication studies, particularly the study of news and journalism (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). By comparing the two channels' coverage of the blasts, this study identifies discrepancies in terms of sources used, dominant frames employed, and attribution of responsibility.

Analysing CGTN and CNN International's coverage of the Tianjin blasts allows us to understand how the media interprets a disaster. Considering the power of news framing in shaping public opinion (De Vreese, 2005), exploring the frames used by both channels can provide broader analysis into the different perspectives of Chinese and Western media, their roles as instruments of 'soft power', and the prospects of Beijing loosening press controls during events that affect many people.

Understanding contemporary Chinese media

Modern efforts to categorise national press systems have been guided by the *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956), which provides a theoretical framework for studying the mass media system in a country based on the authoritarian, libertarian, Soviet-communist, and social responsibility models. For the past 60 years, the Four Theories have dominated discourse in Western journalism education and research despite scholars drawing attention to their limitations in characterising Asian media systems, given the continent's unrivalled audience scale and continuous transformation of their media's professional and structural traits (Yin, 2008; Ostini & Fung, 2002). China's media system was traditionally associated with the Soviet-communist model under the Four Theories, where the press is subordinate to the interests and functions of the state. Unlike liberal-democratic media systems, China's media has historically been used to communicate official versions of reality (Tay & Turner, 2015, p. 30) to preserve national unity and protect the nation from internal and external threats (Yu, 2009). Since the Communist Party of China (CPC) established its rule in 1949, there has been no concept of people's 'right to know' in the context of China's media system (Yu, 2009, p. 9).

Since 2004, journalists at CCTV's English-language news channel (now known as CGTN), like their colleagues at CCTV's Chinese-language news channels, have tried to practice their watchdog function to a permissible degree while fulfilling their traditional duty to cooperate with authorities (Zhu, 2012, p. 185). The need for greater openness by holding the government to account during disasters became clear after a state media blackout during the 2003 SARS outbreak resulted in Chinese citizens turning to overseas media (Zhang, 2007). Since then, CCTV's style of disaster reporting has been characterised by greater

openness. Its coverage (in English and Chinese) of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake earned praise from the government, which observed media credibility supports party legitimacy through providing 'a window into the workings of the powerful central leadership' (Zhang, 2011).

Social media has rewritten disaster communication patterns in China (Dwyer & Xu, 2015) thus challenging traditional media to be more competitive in this new innovative, strategic space. A similar trend is noted by Steinhardt (2015, p. 119) in his study of Chinese media coverage of recent domestic protests that found the central authorities have gradually shifted their propaganda policy from a suppressive to a more proactive approach. This move has allowed internet users and investigative journalists to reconfigure public discourse towards protester-sympathetic accounts.

Watchdog journalism in modern China has been characterised 'by gradual movement towards the market without seriously violating traditional norms of propaganda' (Yu et al., 2000, p. 75). Despite a shift in journalism education in China from a Marxist theoretical foundation to a role of a 'watchdog' in society, Yu et al. (2000, p. 75) observe there is still a 'disconnection between classroom teaching and real-world needs'; while ideas about investigative journalism can be discussed in class, its application in a practical sense is limited. This observation has been supported by Zhou (2000) who found partial implementation of investigative journalism in newsrooms, and by Chan (2016) who determined investigative journalism 'struggles but survives' under party-state controls. It is within this setting that we identify the problematic dichotomy of CGTN, specifically whether they are 'watchdogs' or 'guard dogs' of the party-state. The 'watchdog' function involves critical scrutiny of the powerful by journalists undertaken on behalf of the citizenry (McNair, 2008, p. 239), while the 'guard dog' suggests journalists act as 'sentries' for those in power, especially 'when external forces present a threat to local leadership' (Donohue et al., 1995, p. 116).

Categorising China's media system using the *Four Theories of the Press* is problematic due to the daily reality of journalism and broader national conditions. Moreover, the Four Theories were proposed during the Cold War era with a pro-capitalist bias. This has led to a simplified, overtly negative characterisation of the Soviet-communist model. There are significant political and economic differences between contemporary China and the Soviet Union, most notably China's reform and opening-up from 1978 and the influence of globalisation on the domestic mass media. The Four Theories discourse also overlooks problems with the libertarian model, such as concentration of media ownership. On the other hand, Chinese media has itself undergone significant market-driven transformations that have created a multitude of contradictions. Looking at CGTN, for example, it is operationally autonomous yet politically dependent; top-down state control has significantly diminished yet self-censorship at lower

levels remain; journalists are more professional and better qualified than in the past, yet they are beholden to the state (Zhu, 2012, p. 118). In this context, this research explores how CGTN has a significant role in bridging the gap between being a global media organisation and being a representative of China's domestic political system.

Research methodology

This empirical study compared news coverage of the 2015 Tianjin blasts by CGTN (then CCTV News) and CNN International. CGTN's mission is to create 'a better understanding of international events across the world, bridging continents, and bringing a more balanced view to global news through 'neutral, objective reporting' (CGTN, 2017). Following its launch, President Xi urged CGTN to 'make use of abundant information, with a distinct Chinese perspective and global vision, to tell the stories of China' (*Chinese President sends congratulations on founding of CGTN*, 2016). Its 'mobile-first' strategy (CGTN, 2017) targets overseas audiences, who are most active on social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) that are blocked in China (Associated Press, 2016). By the end of 2016, CGTN content had been accessed by 400 million users worldwide (Xinhua, 2017). Although CGTN's ratings are not available, its forerunner, CCTV News, claimed to reach 85 million homes in more than 100 countries and regions (Nelson, 2013).

CNN was established in 1980 as the first 24-hour news network in the US, launching CNN International in 1985 (CNN, 2011). In addition to its television broadcasts that reach more than 293 million households worldwide, its website, CNN.com, is one of the most visited news websites in the world (CNN, 2011). CNN has a chequered history in China, however, where any of its stories deemed sensitive to authorities are routinely 'blacked out' (CNN, 2008). In 2009, the anti-CNN.com website founded by a Chinese student attracted broad support from nationalist sympathisers in response to perceived bias in the coverage of CNN and other Western media outlets of riots in Tibet the previous year (Xinhua, 2008).

It is useful to examine discrepancies in how the Tianjin blasts were framed by CGTN and CNN International, which despite their different cultural and political backgrounds purport to uphold similar journalistic ethics. CGTN America's director-general, Ma Jing, has emphasised the importance of 'traditional journalistic values' including 'accuracy, objectivity, truthfulness, and public accountability' (*The Rundown*, 2012), while CNN president Jeff Zucker has described his network as 'truly fair and balanced' compared to its competitors (Setoodeh, 2016). Despite these common idealist values, the reality for the media in China is more complicated. Since President Xi assumed power in 2012, his vision for state media to be 'powerful, influential, and credible' (Li, 2017) has resulted in combining propaganda with news reporting. On the other hand, there is a trend

towards a journalism model that is underpinned by social responsibility, giving rise to smaller, state-owned media organisations such as SixthTone.com and ThePaper.cn, which cover contentious issues including government corruption and environmental problems (Tatlow, 2016). Despite the constraints of party-directed and self-censorship, journalists in state media are nonetheless adept at 'testing the line and seizing the small window of opportunity' to uphold their watchdog role (Luqiu, 2017).

In their coverage of the 2015 Tianjin blasts, CGTN and CNN International adopted different approaches to news production shaped by cultural, political, and social influences.

The two operational research questions for this study were:
1. How did CGTN frame the Tianjin blasts?
2. How did CNN International frame the Tianjin blasts?

To answer these research questions, three propositions are made:
1. The Tianjin blasts were framed differently in news stories by CGTN and CNN International.
2. The use of sources by CGTN and CNN International differed in their coverage of the Tianjin blasts.
3. CGTN and CNN International held different valences towards the national government in their coverage of the Tianjin blasts.

A mixed methodology comprising framing and content analysis was used to evaluate selected news stories. A quantitative content analysis was used to determine frames and sources used by CGTN and CNN International in their coverage, while a qualitative framing analysis was used to determine the valence. Valence in this article refers to how the media content reflects the government's post-disaster response using the categories of positive, neutral, or negative. By combining these two methods, this study aims to answer the research questions about how news about the blasts was framed by CGTN and CNN International.

Previous scholarship into news framing by Chinese media has identified a handful of frames commonly used in crisis and disaster communication. Feng et al. (2012) used framing theory to present a comparative analysis of how the Associated Press and Xinhua covered the 2008 melamine baby formula scandal in China. The Associated Press focused predominantly on the causes and effects of contamination including links to other safety issues in China, while Xinhua concentrated more on the government's response to the crisis to portray authorities in a positive light. Analysing six Chinese newspapers' coverage of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, Fu et al. (2012) found the mass media in China tend to be 'more cooperative' with authorities after disasters allowing for greater coordination in official announcements, but noted this partnership undermines the media's ability to serve as a 'fourth estate' (p. 83). Yuan (2013) used a framing and discourse analysis of media coverage of a 2010 Shanghai residential building fire, identifying the need to reconfigure the

traditional news paradigm to make room for a new participatory journalist model. These past studies tell us that in the event of a national crisis, China's state media invariably places national interests above the public's right to know. Its coverage tends to support the government's version of events to suppress panic and dissent, while also highlighting positive aspects of the Chinese government's post-disaster response. In this research, we have specifically focused on CGTN's coverage, keeping in mind its mission as a global media channel that strives 'to create a better understanding of international events across the world' (CGTN, 2017).

Data categorisation and collection

The research data from both networks was accessed via their websites, with stories sourced by using the keyword 'Tianjin' and airing dates corresponding to the study period (August 13, 2015 to August 27, 2015). CNN International's system for archiving online stories was beneficial for the coding process, with each story unique thus making sampling easier. By contrast, searches at CGTN's website at the time (english.cctv.com) yielded multiple entries of the same news stories aired in different bulletins. Nevertheless, only unique stories were used in the sampling process to avoid repetition and ensure greater research accuracy. In total, 50 CGTN and 25 CNN International stories were analysed for this research.

This research uses the framing theory of mass communication, which refers to 'the process through which individuals or groups make sense of their external environment' (Boettcher, 2004, p. 332). In the process of newsgathering, editors and journalists use framing to reduce the complexity of the story and render meaning to audiences. According to Scheufele (1999, p. 107), audiences interpret and process information based on the tone of the news story. In this article, the 'tone' is measured by the 'valence' each story holds toward the government's response to the Tianjin blasts. Framing has been explored by various scholars and defined in various ways. Chong and Druckman (2007) note that individual attitudes, beliefs, and values have a major influence on our interpretation of events as media consumers. In addition to attitude, selection and salience are categorised within framing. The framing analysis is interpreted from an audience perspective. Chattopadhyay's (2012) framing techniques informed this research, where close attention is paid to keywords, sources, and visual techniques used in news stories to assert particular frames. The framing analysis is guided by use of adjectives (positive, neutral, and negative) that provide indications of attitudes in addition to the credibility of sources.

Frames

The first proposition held that CGTN and CNN International would frame the Tianjin blasts differently in their news coverage. Based on guiding questions in

Table 1: Distribution of news frames				
	CNN International	Percentage share	CGTN	Percentage share
Loss	19	35%	28	29%
Responsibility	9	16%	4	4%
Cause	5	9%	7	8%
Solution	5	9%	40	42%
Threat	16	29%	10	11%
Others	1	2%	6	6%
Total	55	100%	95	100%

the code book, different frames were identified in both networks' stories during the two weeks' coverage. The 'loss' frame emphasised the loss of property and lives to the disaster. Although it was most dominant for CGTN and CNN International in the first week of the study, by the second week there was a clear divergence as each network focused on different aspects of the Chinese government's post-disaster response. Table 1 shows that the 'loss' frame was dominant in CNN International's coverage, while the 'solution' frame was most common for CGTN. The second most used frame was the 'threat' frame for CNN International and the 'loss' frame for CGTN, which both accounted for 29 per cent. In the first week after the blasts, the strong focus by both channels on the death toll and number of missing people contributed to the prevalence of the 'loss' frame. In the second week, the 'solution' and 'responsibility' frames became more common on CGTN and CNN International respectively. There were noticeable discrepancies in CGTN and CNN International's coverage of certain aspects of the Chinese government's post-disaster response. For example, the issue of compensation for residents whose homes were destroyed was reported using in-studio graphics on CGTN. In contrast, CNN International used dramatic vision of protesting residents chanting slogans outside the Tianjin municipality government headquarters. Moreover, one of its stories on 17 August 2015 focused on relatives of missing firefighters storming a government press conference, which was not covered by CGTN.

Sound and visual effects enhanced the presence of certain frames. CNN International frequently used grim stills of the blast zone, including burnt out cars and shattered glass inside homes, when introducing stories to reinforce the 'loss' frame. In its stories about the 'heroic' firefighters, CGTN used close-ups of faces and, on occasion, an emotive soundtrack to enhance the 'human-interest' frame. These examples demonstrate how both networks used human emotions and the appeal of ordinary people affected by the disaster to assert certain frames in their news stories. This is an established pattern for CGTN and CNN International in

disaster reporting: CGTN focused on 'heroes' and 'outstanding citizens' of the Yushu earthquake (CCTV, 2010), while CNN's coverage of Hurricane Katrina 'engaged in the emotional human aspect' (Lynch, 2007, p. 38) to highlight the helplessness of victims. Categorised in 'others', the 'human-interest' frame was employed in several CGTN stories about Zhou Ti, a 19-year-old firefighter rescued from the rubble two days after the blasts. It was also identified in stories about volunteers distributing water and food to displaced residents.

The 'cause' frame was found to be low (less than 10 percent) in both networks' coverage of the blasts, reflecting ambiguity and tight information control about what sparked the disaster. The 'threat' frame was less common on CGTN (11 per cent) compared to CNN International (29 percent), with the former emphasising government claims that air and water quality was within safe levels. By contrast, CNN International featured multiple stories about rain reacting with chemicals following the blast and cyanide levels being '356 times the safe limit' at the blast site.

The 'responsibility' frame marked another key point of divergence bet ween CGTN (4 per cent) and CNN International (16 percent). In the instances it was used by CGTN, responsibility was attributed to warehouse managers in the industrial zone who had illegally stored hazardous chemicals. The State Council, China's highest administrative body, led the investigation, and President Xi was quoted in CGTN reports saying those responsible would be 'severely handled'. CNN International's use of the 'responsibility' frame, however, primarily involved holding the government to account. Its stories were accompanied by headlines and graphics including 'Chinese citizens demand accountability' and 'Residents demand compensation'. The 'solution' frame was overwhelmingly the most common frame for CGTN, accounting for 42 per cent of the total compared to just 9 percent for CNN International. For CGTN, this frame was evident in coverage of relief efforts, treatment for hospitalised victims, containment and clean-up of chemicals, establishment of temporary offices for affected companies, and extra buses for workers to minimise commercial losses. The 'solution' frame identified in CNN International stories was in relation to the authorities' efforts to clean up sodium cyanide, but often focused on the challenges and included grim commentary. The results above show that CNN International covered the Tianjin blasts predominantly through the 'loss' and 'threat' frames compared to CGTN, which at first used the 'loss' frame before focusing on the 'solution' frame. The first proposition is thus supported by the results, though only partially due to both networks' use of the 'loss' frame.

Sources

The second proposition held that the use of sources would be different on CGTN and CNN International. The five categories of primary and secondary sources and their use within news stories devoted to the Tianjin blasts is outlined in

Tables 2 and 3 respectively. Each source was coded to only one category: military/emergency services personnel (i.e. soldiers, firefighters, medical staff); political actors (i.e. officials from the municipal and central governments); local residents/witnesses (i.e. people in Tianjin); experts (i.e. scientists, political/social/media commentators), and others (i.e. any source outside these categories). The total number of primary sources identified in news stories on CNN International was 14 compared to 39 on CGTN. While CNN International relied on state media reports for key information, such as the tolls of those missing and killed, sources in this article refer to people who contribute to news stories either through interviews, studio discussions, or press briefings.

Overall CGTN used more sources in its coverage. Political actors accounted for the majority, appearing in 39 per cent of CGTN stories. Most sources in this category were local party officials who participated in daily press briefings. None were featured in CNN International news stories, which instead relied on local residents/witnesses (57 percent) far more than CGTN (5 percent). The high presence of local residents/witnesses in CNN International stories supports the dominant 'loss' frame in its coverage, with many stories focusing on witness accounts in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and then displaced residents' bid for compensation for their destroyed homes. CNN International's lack of access to local party officials also contributed to this framing.

The use of military/emergency services personnel as primary and secondary sources was significantly higher for CGTN (both 26 percent) compared to CNN International (14 percent and 0 percent). As China's national broadcaster, CGTN has a well-established relationship with the military in post-disaster reporting facilitated by positive coverage of relief efforts. As a foreign news channel criticised in the past for 'China bashing' (Williams, 2008; Miller, 2011) and censored within China (Fung, 2014), CNN International's reputation and perceived bias manifests mistrust with authorities. This was evident when CNN International's crew was confronted by a firefighter who pushed correspondent Will Ripley and attempted to disassemble his camera during a live broadcast on 15 August 2015.

Among sources listed as 'others' who appeared in CGTN stories were a warehouse manager, factory worker, volunteer relief assistant, and company employee. On CNN International, experts included chemical scientists, health professionals, finance analysts, and a Chinese journalist who discussed social media communication patterns and censorship. It can be concluded from these findings that the prominence of authorities (both military and government officials) as sources on CGTN highlighted the positive aspects of the Chinese government's post-disaster response, while CNN International's reliance on local residents highlighted their personal grievances and demands for compensation.

Table 2: Distribution of primary sources

	CNN International	Percentage of total sources	CCTV News	Percentage of total sources
Military/emergency services personnel	2	14%	10	26%
Political actors	0	0%	15	39%
Local residents/witnesses	8	57%	2	5%
Experts	4	29%	8	20%
Others	0	0%	4	10%
Total	14	100%	39	100%

Table 3: Distribution of secondary sources

	CNN International	Percentage of total sources	CCTV News	Percentage of total sources
Military/emergency services personnel	0	0%	6	26%
Political actors	1	25%	9	38%
Local residents/witnesses	3	75%	2	9%
Experts	0	0%	4	18%
Others	0	0%	2	9%
Total	4	100%	23	100%

Valence

Proposition 3 predicted that different valences toward the Chinese government's post-disaster response would be conveyed in stories on CGTN and CNN International. Data from Table 4 supports this proposition, with nearly half of news stories on CNN International having a negative valence (48 percent) compared to a positive valence (52 percent) on CGTN. However, both networks also had similarly significant proportion of stories with a neutral valance: CNN International had 44 percent compared to 42 percent for CGTN.

There were some exceptions in both networks' dominant valences. Two news stories by CNN International had a positive valence. On 17 August, 2015,

Table 3: Distribution of valence

	Positive	Percent	Negative	Percent	Neutral	Percent	Total
CNN International	2	8%	12	48%	11	44%	25
CCTV News	26	52%	3	6%	21	42%	50

Note: Chinese government's post-disaster response.

a story was aired about a firefighter's survival and the efforts of his comrade, while two days earlier another story emphasised the swift, organised response by authorities to rescue people. Notably, CGTN America featured stories that highlighted the toxic threat of chemicals following rain and cost of losses. However, negative elements of these stories were either minimised or neglected entirely in broadcasts from Beijing. CNN International drew attention to the censorship and lack of transparency from officials in disclosing information to the public following the disaster, which contributed to the negative valence in some stories. Proposition 3 is thus supported by this study's results.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to examine the similarities and differences in frame usage by two satellite television networks, China's state-run CGTN and US-based CNN International, in covering the Tianjin blasts in the two weeks after the disaster (13 to 27 August, 2015). Contrary to some public discourse that suggests there is inherent bias for or against China by CGTN and CNN International, a key finding of this study was the prevailing 'neutral' valence exhibited by both networks in their coverage of the disaster: 42 percent for CGTN and 44 percent for CNN International. Both networks also shared similar framing patterns in the first week after the blasts, concentrating on the loss of lives and property before focusing on other elements, such as solutions to the disaster (CGTN) and, threats and responsibility (CNN International).The use of sources in stories significantly influenced these frames. CGTN continued its established pattern of relying on military and party officials to communicate information after a disaster.

There is a dominant perception of Chinese media as a repressed entity in which constraints on journalists are greater under Xi. Proponents of this view point to China's lowly press freedom ranking (Reporters Without Borders, 2017), wider crackdown on civil society, and exodus of young journalists from their profession (Phillips, 2016). In contrast, the 'US-style' journalism, characterised by CNN, has reaffirmed its importance supporting the function of democracy, particularly in reaction to attempts under the Trump administration to delegitimise it as 'fake news' (Jones, 2017). However, the reality is not as black-and-white as indicated by CGTN and CNN International's reporting of the Tianjin blasts. Amid its newest stage of transition, CGTN is groping for a fine balance between fulfilling traditional party objectives and achieving recognition for objective reporting. In their study of CGTN's operations in Africa, Gagliardone & Pál observed the pursuit of 'freer' reporting by journalists across the continent to match the standards of competitors including BBC and Al Jazeera regarded as standarbearers of 'quality journalism' (p. 1055, 2017). Although this trend has not yet been replicated by Chinese media at the domestic market, dismissing

such a prospect offhandedly neglects the political and professional complexities at CGTN shaping its current direction.

In examining popular protests in China under President Hu Jintao (2003-13), Steinhardt (2015, p. 124) found that the central government calibrated its propaganda controls by signalling sympathy with aggrieved citizens and openly criticising local officials. The central government also pushed for 'the development of new and more proactive propaganda tools' (Steinhardt, 2015, p. 123) during this period. In the words of President Hu, this strategy aimed to 'turn the party-state into the primary definer [of reality] in a media world where simple suppression no longer works' (Zhao, 2008, p. 39). In analysing CGTN's coverage of the Tianjin blasts, we can see how it fulfilled a 'guard-dog' function by facilitating the party-state's definition of 'reality' after the disaster. Despite censorship of the social media (Dou, 2015) and explicit directives that only 'authoritative information' from state media be used in reporting (Han, 2015), the central government engaged in what Brady (2015) describes as 'positive propaganda' in line with President Xi's new-type media strategy. In signalling sympathy, Premier Li Keqiang consoled blast victims' families and urged a transparent investigation (Shepherd, 2015) in remarks after the blasts.

Theoretically, this article suggests that contemporary Chinese media, particularly CGTN, are balancing multiple priorities and objectives. As the global arm of CCTV, CGTN imitates the characteristics of counterparts functioning in more liberal media environments, yet it remains constrained by development-oriented media goals where national interest is paramount. Disasters inevitably create a conflict for Chinese media in managing public and party interests. For CGTN, the 2015 Tianjin blasts presented challenges in giving a voice to those affected while adhering to the 'correct political direction'. Economic reforms over the past 40 years have driven commercialisation of China's media system, which today is influenced both by the party-state and the market system (Meng & Rantanen, 2015). CGTN's global outreach means it has the additional responsibility of maintaining credibility in the eyes of its international audiences while satisfying government's demands and Chinese viewers' expectations at home.

Conclusion

This article aimed to contribute a nuanced perspective in understanding the modernisation of China's media through the lens of disaster reporting. As an organ of the state, CGTN supports national interests as determined by the government. Its capacity to serve as 'watchdog' in society inevitably comes second to its duties as a 'guard dog' for the party-state, especially following a disaster when threats to social order and stability are heightened.

CGTN understands that it needs to be taken seriously to effectively compete with progressive, 'unbiased' international networks. This realisation has allowed

excellent journalism to flourish in patches, recognised through award-winning news features and documentaries. Despite its overall terse reports after the 2015 Tianjin blasts, CGTN's coverage of the disaster included well-informed analysis that explored angles neglected by CNN International and other Western media. It is easy to attribute this deeper coverage to the advantages CGTN has in covering a domestic crisis, where the network is reporting on home soil free of obstacles that normally hinder foreign media; it has a monopoly on and unrivalled access to official sources; and it has superior resources (four journalists can cover far more than one).

While no reliable data is available on Chinese viewers' satisfaction level with CGTN, studies have found the government enjoys high levels of popular support from Chinese citizens (Laiwani & Winter-Levy, 2016). We can only assume that a majority of Chinese audiences of CGTN are reasonably content with the channel's current journalism style and its function in society. Jirik (2008) laments that whenever a piece of research about media in China is presented, the implied norm against which that medium is measured and usually found wanting is the Western press model. This article attempts to challenge this norm by drawing attention to the ideological objectives of the Western press model and highlighting the constructive and complex role CGTN strives to fulfil as a nation-builder; as a 'soft-power' instrument, and as an alternative news source trying to fulfil often contradictory functions as a 'watchdog' and 'guard dog'.

In exploring a new paradigm of press theories, Yin (2008) argues that Confucianism, especially the idea that the government is supposed to take care of people (p. 45), was more influential on China's mass media than principles in the Four Theories' Soviet-communist model. As an international instrument of 'soft power' with growing influence, CGTN occupies a unique space in the spectrum of Chinese media. It targets a global audience and has led the Chinese media's push to be a 'digital-first' news source, yet at the same time its reporting operates within strict boundaries. Its ability to set the agenda, as demonstrated by its coverage of the Tianjin blasts, reflects its growing influence domestically and internationally. Further, the dichotomy of Marxist press principles and journalistic values, such as balance and objectivity, does not imply that there are no overlapping areas between the Chinese and Western media models. During disasters, there is an expectation from the public for exceptional journalism to help people understand what is happening (Steffens, 2012, p. 8), and both the government and media share a common goal to mitigate societal damage (Vultee & Wilkins, 2012, p. 12).

The 2015 Tianjin blasts highlighted that disaster communication is not a zero-sum game for the Chinese government. Through its reporting, CGTN successfully served as the agenda setters of the government's emergency response. It fulfilled its mission to 'report news from a Chinese perspective' (CGTN, 2017) by serving

its traditional mouthpiece role and adhering to party press principles. It remains questionable, however, if its commitment to 'neutral, objective reporting' (CGTN, 2017) stands up to scrutiny in the eyes of international audiences. Despite both CGTN and CNN International registering more than 40 percent of stories with a 'neutral' valence, CGTN's reluctance to focus on aggrieved residents or apportion responsibility to the government undermined its ability to meaningfully bring 'a more balanced view to global news reporting' (CGTN, 2017).

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