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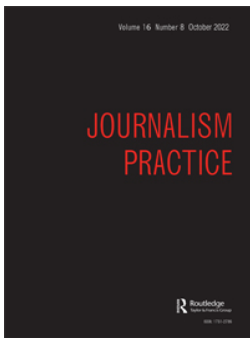
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# International Broadcasting During Times of Conflict: A Comparison of China's and Russia's Communication Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

The vital role of international broadcasting during times of international conflict has gained increasing attention; however, national variations in terms of communication strategies have rarely been explored in depth. This study fills this research gap by providing a comparative analysis of the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian state-sponsored international broadcasters. By examining CGTN's coverage of the South China Sea arbitration and RT's coverage of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, we find that the Chinese international broadcaster preferred official Chinese sources and a peace frame during a time of conflict, whereas its Russian counterpart tended to engage with Western countercultural speakers and present conflict frames. We further interpret the two media's different usage of sources and frames in the light of the media's organizational culture and the sponsoring states' national identities. The research advances the scholarship on the increasingly intensive information war between the East and the West through the way international broadcasters cover international conflicts. It enriches our understanding of the cultural and national dynamics underpinning the non-Western emerging countries' approaches of international communication.


## KEYWORDS

International broadcasting; public diplomacy; international conflicts; South China Sea arbitration; Ukraine crisis; Chinese foreign policy; Russian foreign policy

## Introduction

China and Russia are increasingly engaged in disseminating discourses and narratives to a broad range of audiences beyond their borders. Although the United States has thus far retained the role of an international hegemon by shaping the perceptions of international politics through news media and popular culture (Löfflmann 2013), this country is reducing its funding for public diplomacy (Nelson 2013; Zakaria 2017). Proliferating information technologies have enabled direct interactions between the public and news media, and facilitated the development of public diplomacy initiatives by non-Western countries (Bjola, Cassidy, and Manor 2019). Thus, China and Russia, in turn, are intensively investing in externally oriented communication projects in order to expand their

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international reach (Rawnsley 2015). During challenging circumstances as well as in more routine times, such nations depend on international broadcasting to engage in what Sheaffer and Gabay named as public diplomacy (2009), externally oriented communication (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015), or outward facing propaganda (Carter and Carter 2021). For Price (2003), international broadcasting plays a vital role in both international and domestic politics, determining the future of a nation's development and reform. Considerable academic attention has been focused in this respect on China and Russia, which are among the largest powerful countries in the world, yet in need to counter the West's vast soft power resources (Atlantic Council 2020; Bērziņš et al. 2015; Roman, Wanta, and Buniak 2017). However, research on China's and Russia's international broadcasting has two main limitations. First, instead of exploring how precisely Russia and China narrate world politics, studies have often examined the two countries' communication efforts through a Western-centric securitized lens. Terms such as "charm offensive" and "sharp power" are some related examples (Kurlantzick 2007; Walker et al. 2017). The tendency to "look for enemies" (Suzuki 2009, 789) and the fear of a "propaganda threat" (Chernobrov and Briant 2020, 12–13) emanating from authoritarian countries that can adversely affect Western values, norms and models, generates blind spots in the precise analysis and understanding of authoritarian broadcasting styles and strategies. Second, although single-case studies on China's and Russia's outreach actions have flourished (Avgerinos 2009; Brady 2015; Velikaya and Simons 2020), variations in the content and style between the two major authoritarian players in international broadcasting are yet to be studied in a systematic manner (Rawnsley 2015). Some explorative studies have brought light on the common counter-hegemonic visions and divergent communication styles of the two broadcasters (Rawnsley 2015; Wilson 2015; Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015). However, systematic comparisons of Chinese and Russian international media's coverage of international conflicts, both closely connected to their national interests, are scant. Single-case studies, though delineated the contours of CGTN's and RT's communication styles, cannot be substituted to a comparison of how these channels communicate international conflicts that have similar geopolitical importance to their sponsoring states.

Against this background, the paper aims to explore the distinctive approaches that CGTN and RT adopt to counter Western media's representation of world politics. Responding to Rawnsley's (2015) appeal to look into the communication styles of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters and contextualize these specifics in the organizational and media-state textures, we propose a systematic comparative content analysis of CGTN's and RT's coverage of the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis. The South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis mark China's and Russia's clashes with the West over the global geopolitical order at the two ends of Eurasian continent. An examination of the two media's coverage of the respective cases seeks to map out CGTN's and RT's use of sources and frames in their coverage of international conflicts. Further, we analyze the cultural and institutional contexts that made these communicative features to emerge. Such a comparison is essential as it allows an examination of commonalities and divergences of non-Western emerging powers' international communication strategies within similar political systems, media genres and natures of events. The research intends to advance our understanding of emerging powers' discursive contestation of the West in a broader sense, as well as open the discussion on the impact of

national and institutional-cultural factors on the communication strategies of authoritarian states sponsored international broadcasters.

The paper begins with an overview of previous studies' discussion of China's and Russia's approaches to international broadcasting and implications for CGTN's and RT's communication styles. Subsequently, the article introduces the analytical framework, data, and methods employed to reveal the similarities and differences between the two channels' communication strategies. The article then presents the empirical findings of the comparative content analysis of CGTN's coverage of the South China Sea Arbitration and RT's coverage of the Ukraine crisis. The findings are discussed from the viewpoint of the two channels' organizational culture and the sponsoring countries' national identities.

## Literature Review

### *International Broadcasting: A Contested Battlefield*

International broadcasting as an "elegant term for the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders of another" (Price 2003), has been widely used in the time of international conflicts and war since the twentieth century. During the two World Wars and in the interval, the communicative practices that intend to "manage collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" are conceptualized as "propaganda" (Lasswell 1927, 627). "Propaganda" remained a neutral term until WWII, when it started to gain unpleasant connotations for its increasing interlink with authoritarian regimes (Lasswell 1951; Klemperer 2013). Emerging in the mid-1960s, "public diplomacy" became a predominant terminology to capture the communication practice the international actors draw upon to shape the public opinion of another country in order to achieve foreign policy goals (Cull 2008). The real differences between "propaganda" and "public diplomacy" are contested. Some have defined "public diplomacy" away from "propaganda" for its stickiness to facticity, objectivity and mutuality (Brown 2008). Others perceive the dichotomy a contingent policy for the US to "reserve the term propaganda for the works of enemy and to embrace a new benign term for its own democratic practice" (Cull 2013, 143). They thus propose to use public diplomacy for its less value-laden and ideological nature (Szostek 2020). Another term that is usually interlinked with international broadcasting is journalism. The proximity of international broadcasting to journalism is due to its structural adherence to the news genre, which means the culture of journalism will both influence and contradict with international broadcasting (Cull 2008). In practice, international broadcasting may straddle between the two categories as the state-sponsored broadcaster. For example, the US-sponsored Al Hurra, which vows to advance objective journalism, de facto advocates the US policy line, owing to financial and administrative constraints (Seib 2009). Our research does not aim to delve into the theoretical debates on the nature of China's and Russia's international broadcasters, as the conceptual differentiation between public diplomacy and propaganda regarding China and Russia is more often than not blurry (Rawnsley 2013). Rather, it seeks to figure out the different sources and frames Chinese and Russian international broadcasters employ to construct favorable discourses about international conflicts and to counter western narratives.

### ***Different International Communication Approaches: Image Fever and the Cynical Attacker***

A comparison of China's and Russia's international communication strategies is beneficial not only because the two national media systems fall into the category of the authoritarian model under Hallin and Mancini's (2004, 2011) typology, but also because Wilson (2015, 295) indicates that the two countries are "authoritarian regimes that have been deeply imprinted with the values and attitudes of their Marxist-Leninist heritage, which constitutes an important element of their national identity." In the twenty-first century, the international communication strategies of China and Russia have diverged after a long period of joint development. The primary driving force for the two countries' investment in international broadcasting was their desire to reshape their national images during the early 2000s. With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and Russia's integration into the international energy market, the two governments aimed to create a favorable environment for their economic outreach and foreign policy endeavors (Wilson 2015). Under the flags of peaceful development and a harmonious world, China, through its image campaign, strived to present itself as a stable, reliable, and responsible economic partner in order to mitigate "China threat" suspicions and optimize opinions in the international environment (d'Hooghe 2015; Zhao 2015). To leverage energy reserves and return to the great power bloc, Russia endeavored to present itself as a reliable business partner that embraces an open market and abides by democratic values (Kiseleva 2015). International broadcasting is a crucial tool for rebuking long-held negative views that were considered to be induced by the distorted and demonized representations in Western media (Brady 2015; Simons 2011). At that stage (2000–2007), China's and Russia's international communication gravitated toward self-image promotion, which was conceptualized as a "charm offensive" (Kurlantzick 2007; Pan, Isakhan, and Nwokora 2019) and rarely involved discursive offensives against others.

The divergence between Chinese and Russian international communication strategies began to emerge around 2008, when China continued signaling the benevolence of its rise, and Russia adopted a confrontational approach to pull Western countries down. In 2009, China upgraded its financial and policy commitment to the "Media going out" project (SCMP 2009), which aims to present "a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China," instead of overcriticizing Western societies (Li and Wu 2018). Against this background, China's externally oriented news media CCTV International was revamped as CCTV News and expanded its foreign language news portfolio. In the same year, the Russian flagship international broadcaster RT launched the campaign "Question more" to transform from a Russian public relations promoter to an offensive journalistic underdog, shedding light on the dark side of Western societies (Herpen 2015; Richter 2017). According to Rawnsley (2015, 275), this differentiation from a joint starting point can be attributed to Russia's new communication policy line. Although Chinese international communication practitioners kept holding the belief that "to know us is to love us," Russians developed a "*ne opravdivatsya*" strategy ("do not explain") (Rawnsley 2015), re-orientating its international communication towards exposing the credibility gap between US words and deeds, and revealing the bias inherent to Western media (Headley 2015). CCTV's China-centered approach continued and was even intensified in Xi's era. Responding to Xi Jinping's appeal to "tell China's story well" in the

time of media convergence, the channel relaunched itself as CGTN (China Global Television Network) on 31 December 2016. Under the new slogan “See the difference”, it aims to deliver “different coverage for the same world”, and to include “different perspectives for the same coverage” (Li and Wu 2018). The core concern driving the present study will be: to what extent do the coverages of international crises by CGTN and RT reflect the respective, distinctive geopolitical strategies of their sponsoring states?

### ***Chinese and Russian International Broadcasting During Times of International Conflict***

In the complex matrix of Chinese and Russian international media, CGTN and RT deserve particular attention for their political importance and comparable televisual genre. CGTN received political endorsements from Chinese President Xi who urged the media to “tell China stories well” upon its establishment (CCTV English 2016). Under Xi’s leadership, the external media flagship assumed a central place in China’s “Great Overseas Outreach” (*Da wai xuan*) project (Diamond and Schell 2019), which aims to not only promote China’s national image but also win overseas consensus regarding China’s global vision (Gagliardone 2013; Gagliardone and Pál 2017). Vowing to move away from old-fashioned propaganda, CGTN fully embraced digital platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Weibo, and WeChat, into its portfolio (Li and Wu 2018), and attempted to provide global audiences with accurate and timely news coverage and rich audiovisual resources (CGTN 2020). Similarly, RT plays a vital role in Russia’s external communication project. As President Putin claims, RT is built to “not only provide an unbiased coverage of events in Russia but also break the Anglo–Saxon monopoly on global information streams” (Kremlin.ru 2013). Incubated by the Russian state-owned media company RIA Novosti, RT is fully funded by the Russian state Duma and has its editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, appointed as editor-in-chief of the media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya (“Russia Today” in Russian, the parenting agency overseeing RT channel), which incorporated RIA Novosti, Sputnik, and Voice of Russia in 2013 (CSIS 2014). RT prioritizes audiovisual newscasts because Simonyan (2016, 53) believes that TV news outperforms other news formats (newspapers, radio, and social media) and provides the most “professional, comprehensive, and visual” media representation. RT’s digital engagement strategy is more successful than that of CGTN, with its channel the first to hit 10 billion viewership on YouTube (RT 2020). In fact, its suspension from the European market during the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War for its pro-Russian coverage was also due to its digital success and growing influence on European public opinions (The Washington Post 2022).

Chinese and Russian external communication styles are in part directly reflected by CGTN and RT. Empirical studies have suggested that CGTN tends to adopt official sources (Fearon and Rodrigues 2019; Gabore 2020) and have confirmed Yang’s (2017, 86) observation that CGTN vows to “push Chinese perspectives and voices into the international arena in order to contest the discursive power of the West.” Moreover, increasing evidence indicates that CGTN is employing a new strategy of “borrowing mouths,” which refers to the use of pro-China sources to legitimize the Chinese policy line (Alpermann 2020). The use of such sources significantly shapes CGTN’s tones and frames (Fearon and Rodrigues 2019; Gabore 2020). CGTN not only tends to frame China as a promoter of global order and harmony (Madrid-Morales 2017; Marsh 2017; Zhu 2022) but also

represents China's inclination to portray developing countries in a positive light, with the aim of both breaking the stereotypical presentation of Western media and paving the way for China's diplomatic offensives (Matingwina 2016). In other words, CGTN positions itself in the paradigm of "positive reporting", or "constructive journalism" (Zhang and Matingwina 2016). By sharing CGTN's rationale to present different perspectives from Western mainstream media, RT has engaged with a wider range of opinion holders in Western societies. In a move to minimize its Russian profile, RT managed to incorporate Larry King (a distinguished host formerly worked in CNN), Ed Schultz (a former talk show host on MSNBC), and Chris Hedges (a former reporter for NPR and the New York Times) into its news production team and include high-profile politicians, such as Jeremy Corbyn (UK), Nigel Farage (UK), and Bernie Sanders (USA) into its interviewee pool (Richter 2017). By reaching out to dissidents in Western society, RT revives the Soviet propaganda strategy of "agents of influence" or "useful idiots" and attempts to legitimize Russian foreign policy among Western audiences by using credible sources (Abrams 2016).

Compared to CGTN's positive approach, RT appears to be featured with a more aggressive communication style. Despite a short PR period (promoting Russia's national image), RT shifted to critical journalism under the "question more" campaign in 2009 (Richter 2017). The target of the question was usually the West, especially the US government (Yablokov 2015; Zhu and Jiang 2018). RT's anti-Westernism taps into narratives such as the decline of Europe, liberal interventionism, the hypocrisy of Western societies, and the corruption of liberal democracies (Kluver, Cooley, and Hinck 2019; Richter 2017). Negative narratives regarding the West serve to neutralize Western criticisms of Russia and naturalize Russia's political system and foreign policy line (Hutchings and Szostek 2015). Moreover, RT uses populism and anti-elitist discourses to mobilize an imagined global community of "the people" against the dangerous "others." The "others" in the context of Russia generally refer to the US government or other Western countries (Tolz 2001; Yablokov 2015).

Populist discourse, as used by RT, refers to "a mode of identification available to any actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary" (Panizza 2005). Controversial events, such as Occupy Wall Street movement, the Guantanamo Bay scandal, and the 2010 WikiLeaks scandal, evoked populist dissatisfaction against economic inequality and global fury against the US's violation of human rights (Richter 2017). These conspiratorial narratives have reframed the Russia-US relationships. By portraying the United States as a "puppet master" that interfered in the politics of Libya and Afghanistan through the manipulation of overseas NGOs, RT subtly justified the Kremlin's crackdown on NGOs in Russia (Yablokov 2015). The magnification of the grievances of the marginalized and the vocalization of populism and antielitism further aim to confirm Russia's equal status with or superiority to Western democracies (Yablokov 2015).

## Data and Method

### Case Selection

To determine differences in communication strategies between China's and Russia's International broadcasters, this study adopts the most similar system design approach to



identify variations in key variables among similar cases (Przeworski and Teune 1970). First, China and Russia are selected to focus on authoritarian powers shaped by an intertwined communist legacy. Second, the inclusion of CGTN and RT ensures that variables such as the nature (state sponsorship), genre (televised news), and modality (multimodal and multiplatform) of media are held constant, enabling the emergence of meaningful divergences in communication styles. Third, the selected media events represent international conflicts featuring similar event characteristics and international significance: both the South China Sea arbitration (Philippines vs. China) and the Ukraine crisis (with Russia's annexation of Crimea as its summit) are international conflicts with global implications. Moreover, as suggested by Simons (2015) in his comparative public diplomacy study, they are crucial moments for China and Russia to contest territorial boundaries, renegotiate international norms, and expand their geopolitical clout on both discursive and physical battlefields. However, these cases bear limitations. Arbitration is largely a juridical action accompanied only occasionally by military exercise, whereas the Ukraine crisis involves military confrontations, which may compromise the results of a comparative framing analysis. To compensate for this slight asymmetry, we add discursive disagreement to the criteria of conflict framing, which reduces the impact of the characteristics of an event on the accuracy of measurement, enabling the detection of conflict frames in both international lawsuits and physical confrontations.

The South China Sea arbitration is chosen for three reasons. First, the initiation of arbitration by the Philippines marks the first time that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was applied to disputes in the South China Sea; it sets a legal precedence for territorial dispute management in contested waters (Bernard 2019; Rabena 2018). Second, China's objection to the arbitration and persistent claim of the nine-dash line demonstrates the state's determination to seek great power status in the West Pacific (Curtis 2016; Varrall 2015; Zhao 2018). Third, the arbitration fosters an intensive discursive investment by China in promoting the legitimacy of Chinese foreign policy as well as the legality of its jurisdiction (Bensa and Wijaya 2017; Strating 2020). Considering these three factors, we believe that the South China Sea arbitration is a valuable case for evaluating China's international communication style during times of crisis.

Resembling the South China Sea conflict, the Ukraine crisis highlights the chronical contestation of the European security order by Russia since the 1990s. While the South China Sea arbitration is a clash between the emerging powers of China and the West, the 2014 Ukraine crisis reflects the contradictions between Russia and the West. Going beyond litigation, the Ukraine crisis is the largest *de facto* territorial change in Europe since the end of the Cold War (Mankoff 2014), with an accompanying normative contestation over sovereignty and self-determination. The aggressive territorial revision at stake shows Russia's goal of asserting its status as a great power by resetting the European security order (Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Pezard et al. 2017; Pifer 2019). Moreover, the Ukraine crisis blended a discursive offensive and a military attack. Longitudinal tracking has shown the augmentation of Russia-sponsored information actions by media, thinktanks, and activists during the Ukraine crisis (Biersack and O'Lear 2014). Many studies have also confirmed how Russia's information warfare has confused the European public and delayed the EU's response (Hutchings and Szostek 2015; Riga 2015).

## **Sampling**

We collected the news video clips from CGTN's and RT's official YouTube accounts, respectively tagged "South China Sea" and "Ukraine unrest". The sampling approach has operationality and directionality because the data could be easily accessed and they appropriately encapsulated the core message that the channels intended to convey to global audiences; the data were selected, edited, and uploaded by the media organizations. We consulted the channel's original websites to verify the validity of the YouTube sample and did not identify any major discrepancy. The systematic viewing of the clips from the sample (see below) reveals that we were close to saturation, that is, the last additional clips that we view bring less and less novelty regarding our research question. However unfortunately in the absence of random sampling from the exhaustive corpus of original programs, we are not able to fully certify the sample's exhaustiveness and inclusivity. On these grounds, we cautiously claim that our research findings are an accurate and generalizable account of RT and CGTN's coverage of the two crises.

The folders originally contained 388 video clips. After having screened out raw CCTV footage, aerial photographs and talk show programs, and deleted duplicate videos, only core materials (news bulletins) were retained as our sample: 177 CGTN clips and 76 RT clips. Although the number of CGTN videos exceeds the number of RT videos, the length of RT videos (11 h 9 m in total, 8 m 49s per clip on average) exceeds CGTN's (4 h 17 m in total, 1 m 28s per clip). The balance between the number of videos and video length ensures data comparability. The videos were transcribed for content analysis.<sup>1</sup>

## **Content Analysis**

To compare and contrast the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters, two indicators are targeted in the content analysis: source and frame. The analysis of sources is crucial because media reproduce and legitimize power hierarchies through the selective inclusion or exclusion of different voices (Cook 1998, 5; Couldry 2010; Ginneken 2009, 91; Tuchman 1980, 95). Our main goal was to evaluate the extent to which CGTN and RT reproduce the sourcing patterns of Western mainstream media, and to compare the two channels. Sources were coded in two dimensions: nationality and social status. (1) Following Atwater and Green's (1988) and Wittebols's (1996) coding scheme, we distinguished five categories of nationalities: host country (China vs. Russia), country of dispute (the Philippines vs. Ukraine), the West (including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union), controversial region (Crimea), and other (countries that are not directly involved in conflict). (2) Inspired by prior research, we designated the status of the source as governmental official, expert, layperson, military personnel, entrepreneur, police, journalist, and activist (Galtung and Ruge 1981; Lasorsa and Reese 1990; Webb, Schirato, and Danaher 2002). The coding scheme of the sources is displayed in Appendix 1 and 2.

Framing is the second focus of our content analysis. Framing refers to a journalistic practice of selectively highlighting certain features of an actor or event in a news report, at the expense of other possible features (Pan and Kosicki 1993; Tankard 1991).

In the context of international broadcasting, framing constitutes a strategic action to advance an interpretation that favors sponsoring states (Kim and Jahng 2016). According to Entman (1993), framing is a complex that embeds problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the concerning news event. In this study, we mainly focused on the generic frames marking conflict versus peace (de Vreese, Peter, and Semetko 2001), which are among the most frequently used frames in mass communication research (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). To consider the different characteristics of events, we identified conflict framing as news reports that emphasize conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions on verbal or physical levels (Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese 2018, 1690; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000, 95).

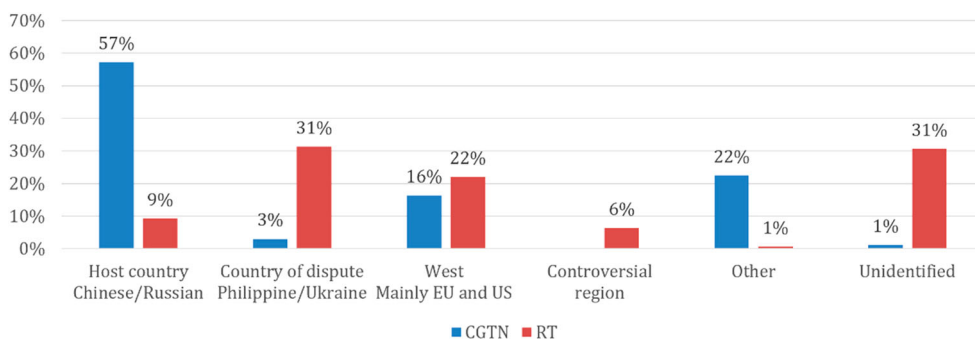
Although conflict frames are widely known for their capacity to attract public attention by dramatizing violence and casualties, they have been criticized for sowing division and exacerbating confrontation (Galtung 1986; Lee 2010). By contrast, peace frames promote mutual trust and enhance the prospect of peace (McGoldrick and Lynch 2000). Drawing on the literature on peace journalism, we defined peace frames as those that emphasize “peace initiatives, tone down ethnic and religious differences, prevent further conflict, focus on the structure of society, and promote conflict resolution, reconstruction, and reconciliation” (Lee 2010, 362). A peace frame is identified when the content involves agreement finding, solution seeking, peace building, or reconstruction. An examination of a peace/conflict frame can reveal schemes through which CGTN and RT cover international conflicts of geopolitical significance. The coding scheme of peace/conflict frames is displayed in Appendix 3.

## Findings

### *Alternative Voices? Megaphone of the pro-China Developing World Versus the Alternative West*

Confirming counter-hegemonic premises, Chinese and Russian international broadcasters vocalize voices marginalized by Western mainstream media. In this context, CGTN prioritizes Chinese official sources, whereas RT prioritizes anti-establishment Western experts. CGTN’s sourcing strategy is twofold. First, official Chinese sources are given substantial attention by CGTN. As presented in Figure 1, more than half (57%) of CGTN’s videos feature at least one Chinese source. The majority of Chinese sources are affiliated with the Chinese Foreign Ministry or Defense Ministry, including Wang Yi, Lu Kang, and Yang Yujun. This is in agreement with the report by Liao and Ma (2014) that officials and spokespersons affiliated with the Chinese foreign and defense ministries constitute the main information sources of official Chinese media. The concentration of the official sources of China markedly differs from that of the Philippines (3%). This finding indicates that CGTN disseminates Chinese voices, perspectives, and interpretations of the South China Sea arbitration at the expense of those from the Philippines, a key stakeholder in international arbitration and territorial conflicts. This asymmetry reveals a deviance from the norm of balance in representing news events where Chinese national interests are at stake (Bennett 1996).

This prioritization of Chinese official sources is indicative of CGTN’s organizational culture. For CGTN, recycling Chinese official voices is both an administrative requirement



**Figure 1.** Distribution of source nationality per channel. Notes: Number of clips (containing source with corresponding nationality)/ reported to total number of clips (%).

and an ideological safety measure. As part of the China Media Group, a ministry-level media conglomerate under the direct supervision of the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, CGTN vows its loyalty to the party's leadership (Burns 1989; Shambaugh 2017). In practice, this loyalty is evaluated by the congruence between their news selection and framing and the will of those in power. According to Palmer (2018), "Incidents that *RT* could shrug off, such as the political scientist Yascha Mounk slamming the Russian President Vladimir Putin live on air or James Kirchick damning the station as propaganda for a bigoted state, would kill careers at CGTN." Thus, regardless of risk aversion or active promotion seeking, reproducing the voices of leaders and representatives of key ministries is a safe strategy.

Another pattern of CGTN's sourcing is to highlight the voices of the developing world. The second most cited sources are from countries that were not directly involved in the relevant dispute; these sources appear in 22% of the clips. A closer examination reveals that these sources tend to be from developing countries that have friendly diplomatic relationships with China, including Iran, Tanzania, and Pakistan<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 2). This finding suggests that CGTN is employing a "borrow-mouth" strategy to defend Chinese foreign policy by using testimonies from China sympathizers. Second, the fact that CGTN is widely engaged with sources from developing countries highlights China's counter-hegemonic agenda of supporting and unifying the voice of the developing world against the hegemonic media representation of a few developed countries (Benabdallah 2017, 508). Thus, CGTN fulfills its promise to empower alternative voices, although only those of countries who have good diplomatic relationships with China.

CGTN's preference for highlighting the voices of developing countries can be traced to China's identity as a developing country. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping, China's national identity as a developing country has been driven by China's foreign policy of both representing the developing world against Western hegemony and strengthening South-South cooperations (Deng 1974; Pu 2017; Zhou 2021). CGTN fulfills its promise to not only speak for the developing world but also construct a supportive international society for China's foreign policy.

Unlike CGTN, *RT* generally avoids using official Russian sources (9%); instead, it provides exposure to Western (22%) and Ukrainian (31%) sources. A closer examination reveals that citizens of the Ukrainian mainland and Crimea were mainly employed to



**Figure 2.** Distribution of the nationality of CGTN's sources. Notes: Number of clips containing sources with corresponding non-Chinese nationality.

express grievances against protestors and voluntarily express support for Crimean independence (RT 2014g; RT 2013d). Unlike CGTN, which intentionally mutes anti-Chinese voices from Western politicians, RT exposes such voices for the purpose of inoculation. Originating from medical science, inoculation in a communication context refers to building an attitudinal immunity against certain perspectives by exposing the audience to weakened arguments accompanied with pre-emptive refutations, which stimulate voluntary resistance against additional attitudinal attacks (McGuire 1961, 1964). In this context, RT invites Western mainstream politicians, such as the Bulgarian Member of European Parliament (MEP) Marusya Lyubcheva and the German MEP Alexandra Thein, to serve as targets of Russia's discursive counterattack. As a guest speaker, the Bulgarian MEP champions the prosperous prospect for Ukraine to collaborate with the EU by using the example of Bulgaria. The Serbian-American scholar Srdja Trifkovic responds by opining that integration with the EU has brought Bulgaria misfortune and backwardness:

I'm amazed that a Bulgarian politician can talk in glowing terms about the European Union when Bulgaria is now a basket case ... it's importing tomatoes from Turkey for goodness sake, and Bulgaria used to supply all of Eastern and Central Europe with vegetables only 20 years ago. From the clip

If Trifkovic's speech dissuades the swaying Ukraine from joining the EU's Eastern partnership program, the British Eurosceptic Robert Oulds speaks of the EU as a rich country club. To add to Trifkovic's sarcasm, Robert Oulds weighs in, indicating that Bulgaria's success was due to it being "within the pay wall of the European Union" (RT 2013c). The narrative works to dissuade the Western European audience from supporting the EU's addition of Ukraine. This case suggests that RT's inclusion of anti-Russian Western government officials creates an impression of a proforma balance, but it de facto exposes the audience to weakened criticisms towards Russia and more importantly compels the formation of arguments against those (Borchers 2011).

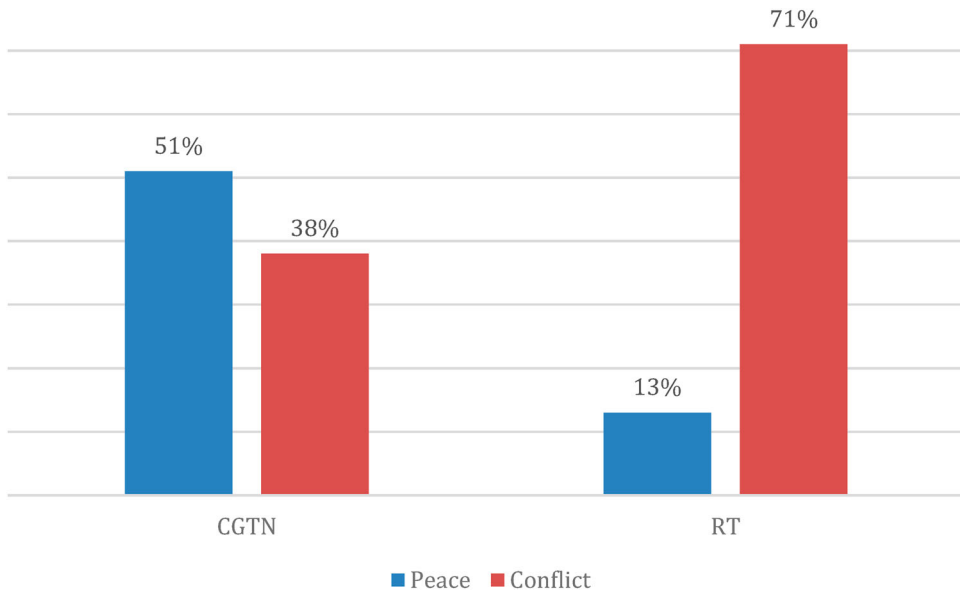
Compared with CGTN's vocalization of developing nations, RT partly reproduces and exploits Western hegemony. We make this argument because Caucasian experts remain the essential reference group for the channel to turn to. Among 50 sources that were attributed to experts in RT's video clips, 49 included Caucasian men, which reproduces and even reinforces the conventional racial and gender order of Western media. Many of the Caucasian guest speakers have an Eastern European/Russo–American background, such as Srdja Trifkovic, a Serbian American scholar, and Mark Sleboda, an American-born and raised, Russian sympathizer based in Moscow. This sourcing strategy partly consolidates the racial and gender hierarchy of knowledge production in Western media, instead of challenging it; middle-aged Caucasian male authorities are widely used to interpret international news (Lee 1998, 356). The inclusion of Western mainstream politicians helps boost RT's accessibility among Western audiences. Morales (2020) indicates that RT's visual and aural similarity with Western media effectively increases its attractiveness within the pan-Western market. RT's usage of counter-establishment Caucasian experts can be perceived as the revival of the "useful idiots" strategy. The goal of this strategy is to legitimize the Russian foreign policy line by using credible dissident insiders within Western society and "lend RT a veneer of legitimacy that allows it to mask its propagandistic intentions and instead portray itself as a serious, reliable newscaster" (Richter 2017, 26).

As much as for CGTN, RT's unusual practice of magnifying Western sources instead of Russian ones is connected to RT's organizational culture. Self-positioned as a counter-hegemonic media, RT is provided with adequate institutional leeway by the Kremlin to undermine Western positions by using various tools. Different from his Chinese counterpart, Putin does not seem to demand that the channel tells the Russian story well; instead, he emphasizes that the media's priority should be to "break(ing) the Anglo–Saxon monopoly on the global information streams" instead of becoming "any kind of apologist for the Russian political line, whether domestic or foreign" (Putin 2013). RT's strategic distancing from Russia is also echoed by its editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan, who justifies the "de-Russification" strategy of the channel with the question "Who is interested in watching news from Russia all day long?" (Von Twickel 2010).

This confirms that RT pursues its counter-hegemonic agenda to suspend Western media's dominance in representing and interpreting reality, not by magnifying Russian voices but by relying on a wider range of sources. The finding also verifies Richter's (2017) and Abrams's (2016) conviction that RT is reviving the Soviet propaganda technique of using "useful idiots" that exploit the insider's influence and the patriotic dissident position to undermine the legitimacy of target governments.

### ***Covering International Conflicts with Different Frames***

Apart from sourcing patterns, we compare CGTN's and RT's framing patterns. The conflict frame is both visible in CGTN and RT coverage, although a higher presence ratio was noted in RT (71%) compared with CGTN (38%) (See Figure 3). CGTN mainly frames international conflicts using a peaceful schema. Although this schema points to the inevitability of a conflict, it admits the attainability of peace through the endeavors of stakeholders to negotiate and coordinate. By contrast, RT demonstrates a more explicit preference for conflict.



**Figure 3.** Peace and conflict frames in CGTN and RT. Notes: Share of news bulletins containing the frame.

The peace frame within CGTN emphasizes that disputes between the Philippines and China should be resolved through negotiation (the term “negotiation” appears in 37 out of 90 clips with a peace frame). This confidence and belief in the possibility of resolving problems through consultation and negotiation instead of military threats appears to indicate China’s reluctance to use force, at least discursively. As Feng (2007: 25) summarizes, “under security threats, diplomatic means and negotiations are preferred and proposed as the first preference” for China, and even if “force is employed under the condition that all other means turn out to be unsuccessful, the Chinese will still pursue opportunities to go back to the negotiation table for a peaceful settlement.” The constant emphasis on the need to resolve the China–Philippines conflict through peaceful talks (CGTN 2016a, 2016d), dialogue and negotiations (CGTN 2016f), and consultation and negotiation (CGTN 2016b, 2016c) demonstrates China’s official appeal to solve the South China Sea deadlock through diplomatic measures instead of the use of force.

CGTN’s preference for a peace frame is the most prominently observed in scenes where potential military conflicts are involved. In other words, even when reporting on military exchanges between China and its largest geopolitical competitor, the United States, CGTN frames them in a peaceful manner. In clip (CGTN 2016e) a US military visit is covered and visually represented as an example of peaceful cooperation. Instead of showing a series of military drills conducted by both China and the United States, CGTN presents a military visit paid by the United States to China (Figure 4) by means of an amicable scene of US military visitors being greeted by welcoming Chinese children. This showcases the prospect of a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea conflict by the United States and China. The voiceover announces that the US army harbored a cautious yet open attitude toward forming a new balance between China and the United States after the divisive arbitration. This entangled visual and verbal message downplays the military pressure



**Figure 4.** CGTN's footage of the US Army at Qingdao. Notes: The screenshot is obtained from the clip CGTN (2016e).

that the US navy poses to China to push it to accept the arbitration. CGTN instead emphasizes that US forces attempt to restore their relationship with their Chinese counterparts after the arbitration event. The voiceover relays the commander's words:

Fleet Commander Justin Hart spoke briefly to the media and said the visit was aimed at building relationships with his counterparts from the Chinese Navy. From the clip(CGTN 2016e)

The Chinese traditional national culture plays a role in shaping CGTN's communication style, especially its peaceful framing preference (d'Hooghe 2015). The traditional culture that might play a role in mediating CGTN's communication style might direct to the philosophy of Zhong Yong (中庸), alias the doctrine of the mean. In CGTN's context, Zhong Yong's thinking triggers the whole organization to employ discourses that promote peaceful negotiation as a method of conflict management (Ji, Lee, and Guo 2010). Also, Zhong Yong's thinking restrains journalists from CGTN from deviating from the peace-oriented official discourse. In other words, this philosophy permeates the organization and influences its frame selection.

Compared with the peace frames that dominated CGTN, RT has a preference for adopting conflict frames in its coverage of the Ukraine crisis. The main components of the conflict frame within RT were confrontations between the police and protestors and the asymmetric visualization of casualties on the police side. First, most of RT's conflict frames were substantiated with physical confrontations between the police and protestors, with protestors being portrayed as the imposers of violence. Taking Figure 5 as an example: the protestors on the left have been portrayed as initiating violence against the police who are squeezed into the right corner, adopting defensive postures. The horizontal composition divides the photograph into an equal dichotomy between left and



right, which also creates a contrast between protestors (the attacker) and the police (the victims). This visual composition, together with the contrast in body language, portrays protestors as a security threat to the social order and national stability of Ukrainian society because the police are considered the safeguards of order and stability (RT 2013a).

RT is found to asymmetrically present casualties in favor of the police, which corresponds to the practice of war journalism. For example, after a skirmish between the police and protestors, the anchor only disclosed that “70 policemen were injured, and 20 protestors arrested” without revealing the casualties on the protestor side (RT 2014a). This partial representation of police casualties exaggerates the violence of protestors and excludes protestor casualties due to police violence. Furthermore, RT interviews an injured policeman to reveal the protestors’ brutality. The interviewed policeman says, “They covered my head and bound my arms and legs with masking tape and taped up my eyes as well” (RT 2014c). This description of the attack allowed the police to provide their side of the “truth” regarding the conflict to the audience, whereas voices from the protestor side were largely downplayed. Thus, the police were in a better position to shape the audience’s understanding of the conflict, making the audience more likely to empathize with the police and the pro-Russia Yanukovich government that they defend.

This biased representation is further intensified by a visual representation of police casualties. For example [Figures 6](#) and [7](#) showcase the outcomes of physical attacks against the police. The faces or bodies of policemen, positioned in the center of the photograph, intend to create a powerful emotional response. According to visual studies, the human face is the object that is most likely to arouse affective reactions, such as compassion (Smith and Rossit 2018). By allowing the audience to directly gaze at the face of a wounded policeman, RT attempted to mobilize the politics of compassion to construct a shared “we” identity between the police and the audience; RT thus invited the audience to reevaluate the Ukraine crisis without hard persuasion. RT highlights



**Figure 5.** A burning excavator pushed by protestors toward the police. Notes: The screenshot is obtained from the clip RT (2013c).



**Figure 6.** An injured Ukrainian policeman. Notes: The screenshot is obtained from the clip RT (2014b).

physical confrontations between police and protestors and mobilizes the audience's emotive reactions such that they would sympathize with the Ukrainian police.

We postulate that RT's preference for conflict frames primarily has its roots in the Soviet propaganda system. Soviet propaganda featured a recurrent conflict frame during the entire Cold War era (Barghoorn 2015; Shultz and Godson 1984). Influenced by a Leninist dialectical view of history driven by class struggles, Soviet propagandists held that political interactions and historical evolution were driven by constant power struggles ranging from diplomacy, as institutionalized conflict, and war, as a form of violent continuation



**Figure 7.** A Ukrainian policeman on fire. Notes: The screenshot is obtained from the clip RT (2014b).

of political clashes (Shultz and Godson 1984). Reflected in the foreign propaganda realm, Cold War confrontations between capitalist states and the socialist bloc and those between colonial and imperialist groups are normally structured in conflict frames (Barghoorn 2015, 41). Even during the period of *détente*, “conflict” constituted the main mediated frame for Russian propaganda because Soviet propagandists held the belief that peace could only be achieved through struggle (Barghoorn 2015). With the impact of this historical legacy, RT frames the Ukraine crisis as a conflict between Ukrainian protestors and the police, the West and Russia, with portrayed as an upholder of regional peace and order.

A more fundamental factor that accounts for RT’s preference for a conflict frame is Russia’s political culture. Different from China’s advocacy of harmony and peace, Russia’s political culture is established on the martial principle of *Kto-Kovo* (“who dominates whom”) (Ermarth 2009). The principle does not encourage conflicts to be resolved by “negotiations, bargaining, voting, or legal adjudication” but through struggle, intrigue, and force (Ermarth 2009, 87). The Marxist–Leninist ideology, such as Marx’s remark that the destruction of the regime of feudalism and capitalism must “be offensive and executed quickly, pre-emptively if possible” further underlines the significance of offensiveness (Klein 1989). Some commentators believe that Russia’s relative weakness compared with the United States would invite an external attack instead of peaceful *détente*. Therefore, during the Cold War era, Soviet leaders refused to accept the cooperative mutual reassurance that the United States proposed; rather, they stressed unilateral damage control, namely harnessing the capacity to initiate an aggressive first strike to ensure security (Snyder 1977). RT’s discursive attack against the West is a mirror image of the Russian worldview, which is based on the strategic inferiority of Russia. Drawing on an underdog mentality, RT implies that Russia holds a discursively disadvantaged position, susceptible to Western geopolitical and geocultural attacks. The impression of Russia’s discursive vulnerability, once established, is mobilized to rationalize the channel’s pre-emptive discursive counteroffensive.

## Conclusion

Our research provides a nuanced, contextualized, and historicized comparison of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. It extends comparative studies of China’s and Russia’s international communication approaches (Rawnsley 2015; Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015). Contradicting Hallin and Mancini’s (2004, 2011) simplified categorization of political communication that is either within the confine of liberal democracy or on a West/non-West dichotomy, we dig into the characteristics of the content and national and institutional cultures among non-Western international political communication.

Our comparative study confirms some of the features of communication of CGTN and RT observed in prior studies (As summarized in Table 1). CGTN has a stronger tendency to quote the official sources of the host country (Fearon and Rodrigues 2019; Gabore 2020). Following China’s claim to be a developing country, CGTN increases the visibility of developing sources in its coverage. This echoes an interview with CGTN’s controller Liu Cong, in which he states that CGTN not only envisions to empower “a variety of voices ... not just voice of China but also voices of other Asian countries, of African countries and of Latin American nations” (Li and Wu 2018, 41). Although previous studies have attributed

**Table 1.** Comparison between CGTN's and RT's communication styles.

		CGTN	RT
Source	Nationality	China Other countries	Ukraine, The West
	Social position	Governments of developing countries, Chinese experts	Western marginalized experts, western/Ukraine officials, Crimean laypersons
Frame		Peace frame dominated	Conflict frame dominated

CGTN's sourcing patterns, such as prioritizing official sources, to Confucian culture (Fearon and Rodrigues 2019) and attributed the vocalization of developing countries to China's strategy of maintaining diplomatic relationships (Gabore 2020), we consider these strategies to be the implementation of China's developing country identity.

In order to avoid appearing as a megaphone for the Kremlin, RT provides airtime to Western experts and Ukrainian citizens. This implies that the media delicately aligns itself with the disruptive dimension of Russia's foreign policy line of undermining Western moral, cultural, and political supremacy to justify that Russia inherits the European civilization and its ensuing great power status (Neumann 2016; Yablokov 2015). This institutional flexibility to accommodate marginalized opinion holders in Western societies, including some anti-Russian ones, not only leads to a widened viewership in Western societies (Orttung and Nelson 2019) but also proves to be effective in fanning US isolationism among US audiences (Carter and Carter 2021). RT's tolerant, dynamic working environment and democratic organizational structure stimulates reporters to reveal the disfunction and corruption of Western political institutions, adroitly playing into the paradigm of watchdog journalism<sup>3</sup> and anti-establishment populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

Framing is the other angle from which we scrutinized the communication styles of the two media sources and cultural contexts. CGTN holds a preference for peace frames, whereas RT favors conflict frames. We link CGTN's emphasis on negotiation as a mechanism to seek peaceful settlement of regional conflicts and peaceful cooperation with the United States to China's initiative to build the image of a peaceful rising power (Chang and Lin 2014; Li and Worm 2011). Such peaceful discourse is both strategically geared toward dispelling international suspicions of the "China threat" (Li 2008) and legitimizing China's assertive actions with peaceful discourse (Šimalčík 2020). RT's highlighting of physical confrontations between protestors and police during the Euromaidan protests confirms the content analysis findings related to Russia's external-oriented media (Gaufman 2015; Miazhevich 2018; Riga 2015). Its overrepresentation of police casualties at the expense of protestors casualties may fuel public aversion toward the violence of protestors and thus legitimize Russia's interference in Eastern Ukraine. RT's confrontational framing style is a revival of a Soviet propaganda style that used to emphasize the inevitability of violence and clashes among countries or domestic forces, and justify Russia's interventions (Barghoorn 2015).

In terms of journalistic culture, CGTN and RT fall into different categories. CGTN's advocacy of consultation and negotiation as a regional dispute resolution mechanism can be viewed as peaceful and constructive journalism, that provides solutions and positive prospects (Zhang 2014). However, its capacity to convince is likely to be

undermined when proactive measures are being implemented in the South China Sea area (Kuok 2019). By contrast, RT follows the style of war journalism that dichotomizes conflicting forces, dramatizes confrontational scenes, and exaggerates casualties in a one-sided manner (Lichtenstein et al. 2018). Contextualizing our content analysis in the prior literature, we argue that the Zhong Yong philosophy of Confucius culture and the aggressive martial culture of Russia influence CGTN's and RT's framing preferences. This analysis is an attempt to link political culture with the communication style of international broadcasters and lays a foundation for more comprehensive theoretical endeavors.

A comparison using the same grid indicates that the diverging sourcing and framing strategies employed by CGTN and RT require an understanding of national and organizational cultures as well as international identity. As such, this study not only provides insights into the production and mediation processes of CGTN and RT but also opens the space for this culturalist approach for other non-Western international broadcasters, such as in Iran, Egypt, and Turkey. It may also help journalists from outside Russia and China make sense of the programs produced in these States, improve their own understanding of international communication strategies, and develop their own investigations into authoritarian politics.

This study has some limitations. First, the comparative study of South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis cannot claim to represent the whole of CGTN and RT's communication styles, even less the overall communication strategies of these two countries. Future researches could perform longitudinal content analysis in order to assess the stability of the highlighted features, or on the contrary some possible inflection points. Second, future studies could explore CGTN's and RT's digital strategies in a multimodal approach, especially considering social media platforms, which are important for China and Russia's international diplomacy (Huang and Wang 2021; Tsvetkova 2020; Zhang and Ong'ong'a 2021). Third, an audience-related study would bring crucial light on the impact of the said strategies. Although some pioneering studies have validated RT's popularity among certain global audiences (Ortung and Nelson 2019) and its effectiveness in fanning US isolationism among US audiences (Carter and Carter 2021), more comparative audience studies on non-Western international broadcasters (e.g., Morales 2020) are warranted to illustrate an ever-shifting global media consumption landscape.

## Notes

1. Full coding of the corpus is available from the corresponding author upon request.
2. The countries range from Asia (Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Lebanon), Africa (Rwanda, Tanzania), Latin America (Brazil, Chile), and Oceania (Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea).
3. As per watchdog journalism, news media is perceived as an independent monitor of state power that holds the public sector accountable for civil society (Norris 2014); however, foreign news media organizations may interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Codebook of the Nationality of the Sources

Code	Definition	CGTN	RT
1. Host Country	The country that hosts the news media	China	Russia
2. Country of dispute	The country that is directly involved in the dispute	The Philippines	Ukraine
3. West	Western countries that include the Anglo-European community	US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, members of European Union	
4. Controversial region	Region that has its sovereign status contested		Crimea (Ukraine-Russia)
5. Other	Political actors that originate from countries not listed above	E.g. South Africa, Laos, South Korea	E.g. Argentina, Belarus, Iraq

### Appendix 2: Codebook of the Social Positions of the Sources

Code	Definition	Examples: CGTN	Examples: RT
Government official	Elective Politicians, Administrative officials, speaks persons of government institutions, movement leaders	Hong Lei Spokesperson of Chinese foreign ministry (CGTN 2016d)	Victor Yanukovych President of Ukraine (RT 2013b)
Expert	Academic scholars, researchers of a think tank or governmental institutions or experts in a certain area	Wu Shicun President of National Institute for South China Sea studies (CGTN 2016k)	Robert Oulds Chairman, Bruges Group Think Tank (RT 2013c)
Common people	Regular citizens unaffiliated with a particular organization or social position	Chen Yihu Fisherman, Sansha (CGTN 2016h)	Grigory Sitenko Kiev Resident (RT 2013c)
Army	Military force, including the governmental army, self-defense forces, militia	Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy PLA (People's liberation Army) Chief (CGTN 2016f)	Vasily Lobov Head, Air Force Veterans Association (RT 2014d)
Entrepreneur			

(Continued)

Continued.

Code	Definition	Examples: <i>CGTN</i>	Examples: <i>RT</i>
	People are identified as representing, owning, or working for a large corporation or a small business	Li Manjuan Zimbabwe Chinese business association (CGTN 2016l)	Alexey Miller Gazprom CEO (RT 2014b)
Police	Police officers and maritime law enforcers	Captain Xiang Guoxiang From No.1 Law Enforcement Vessel (CGTN 2016c)	Police beaten by masked rioters (RT 2014c)
Journalist	Journalists, reporters, or correspondents of media institutions other than <i>CGTN</i> and <i>RT</i>	Rod Kapunan Columnist, The Standard (CGTN 2016i)	Graham Phillips Ukraine-based Journalist
Activist	The people who advocate or practice activism		Anonymous protestor (RT 2014f)

### Appendix 3: Codebook of the Modes of Representation of Sources

Code	Definition
Public speech	Formal statement at press conference, at congress or diplomatic meeting, etc.
Pre-recorded interview	Pre-recorded interview collected in formal setting: in the office, studio or in the scenes that are edited before broadcast.
Live interview	Synchronous interview of the guest speakers in the studio and through virtual video/audio call.
Leaked conversation	Leak phone calls, overheard speeches.
Ad hoc street interview	Street interview with passers-by, witnesses or common citizens without pre-arrangement.

### Appendix 4: Codebook of Generic Frames: Peace and Conflict Frames

Category	Criteria	Examples: <i>CGTN</i>	Examples: <i>RT</i>
Peace frame	(a) Does it talk about negotiation and agreement? (b) Does it talk about solution seeking and cooperation? (c) Does it talk about the ceasefire and disarmament? (d) Does it talk about reconstruction, rehabilitation?	"China adheres to an independent foreign policy of peace and a good neighborhood policy" (CGTN 2016j)	"In Ukraine, where the country's president Victor Yanukovich has invited the leader of the opposition to become the prime minister in a bit to quell anti-government unrest." (RT 2014e)
Conflict frame	(a) Does the news story reflect verbal disagreement among actors? (b) Does the news story reflect one party/individual/group/country's reproach of another? (c) Does the news story reflect any political contestation among different actors? (d) Does the news story reflect the physical confrontation and/or injury and casualty among actors?	"China has no alternative but to oppose to it and reject it" (CGTN 2016g)	"There is still ongoing clashes between riot police and rioter, fires still burning, over to my head." (RT 2013a)