Trends in Media Framing of China's Engagement in Africa and other Parts of the World

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Abstract

This work critically examines studies that have researched on media framing of China's engagement in different nations of the world. It dissects existing literature in the context of media coverage of China's engagement in Africa and other nations. It tries to find out the most frequently adopted research method in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other countries; to examine the sampling techniques adopted in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other nations; to find out the methods of data analysis adopted in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other countries. Framing theory forms the theoretical basis for this study. The research method is content analysis while the study gathered data from various scholarly articles published in recognised academic journals and thesis accessed online through *Google Scholar* and *Proquest*. The articles were collated and identified based on those that focused their issues on media portrayal of China in other countries especially African nations. Findings show that majority of the studies adopted Content Analysis as their research method. Most of the reviewed studies (93.4%) were conducted in African nations. Also, most of the reviewed studies (80%) adopted purposive sampling technique. In addition, most of the reviewed studies employed deductive frame analysis as their method of data analysis. Seven of the reviewed articles used deductive frame analysis in that regard. This study suggested that more research should study media framing of China's engagement in other nations through different research approaches in order to understand China's engagement more appropriately. It is recommended that other studies should engage the media audiences to know their perception of China's engagement in their respective nations.

Introduction and Background

China has continued to experience rapid rise in different spheres of her national and international engagements since 1950 till date (Whyte, 2013). One of such engagements –the relationship between China and Africa –can be traced back to the 1950s (Pisani, 2014). After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China increasingly opened up to other global nations in economic relations and diplomatic ties. In order to create a more friendly relationship with other nations, China resorted to the practice of public diplomacy. According to Eisenman, Heginbotham and Mitchell (2007), China's increasing employment of 'soft power' is helping her to gain new friends from emerging regions of Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Brown (2012:1) notes that "China's rapid and successful expansion in Africa is due to multiple factors, including economic diplomacy that is clearly superior to that of the United States." According to Center on Public Diplomacy (2016), public diplomacy refers to the public, interactive dimension of diplomacy which is not only global in nature, but also involves a multitude of actors and networks. Nations employ it as a key mechanism through which they maintain mutual trust and productive relationships, and it has become important for building a secure world. According to Hanauer and Morris (2014:1), "China and its African partners interact in a wide range of political, economic, and military-related arenas in ways that advance mutual interests, but economic pursuits lie at the heart of Sino-African relations."

Various countries have been portrayed in the media in various ways. Similarly, the media have continued to frame China's activities in African in various ways (Wekesa, 2013; Umejei, 2015; Moahi, 2015). According to Dollar (2016), the media often portray China's engagement in Africa as enormous and may likely overpower the African continent. The degree to which the media accurately portray China's activities in Africa depends on the aggregation, assessment and or metadata breakdown of studies that have been undertaken by researchers in relations to media coverage of China's engagement in African. In line with the foregoing, this paper examines the methodological approaches of selected empirical studies in the media framing of China's engagement in other nations –especially African nations – in studies conducted in the last five years.

Framing Theory

Media framing refers to the fact that the media can impart a certain perspective, or "spin," to the events they cover and that this, in turn, can influence public attitudes on an issue (Wimmer and Dominick, 2009). It is the way the media portray events in the society. It is embedded in the broader context of media effects research (Scheufele, 1999). The news media generally portray events through episodic and thematic news frames (University of Oregon, 2016). The episodic news frame is the frame that focuses on events that involve human beings who are located in particular places and at a particular time. On the other hand, thematic news frame highlights public issues in a larger context by looking at general conditions of event or their outcomes.

Furthermore, the media subject issues to different frames. The frames can be positive frame, negative frame or indifferent frame depending on the audience and the type of information being presented. Media framing presents issues as logically equivalent alternatives portrayed in different ways or as emphasis frames, which explain reality by focusing on a relevant aspect of an issue (Druckman, 2001). In "equivalence frames", information is presented based on the same facts, but the frames in which it is portrayed change in order to create a reference-based perception. This process offers an inevitable influence over the individuals' perception of the media message, thereby leading to public opinion formation.

Media framing is also a process by which issues are portrayed in the news media. Media frames provide some form of boundaries around a news story, determining what is newsworthy and what is not. Media frame is the "central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (Tankard, 2001: 100). Thus, framing gets beneath the surface of news coverage and exposes hidden assumptions (Tankard, 2001: 97). It also recognises the "ability of a text to define a situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate" (Tankard, 2001: 96). The implication is that journalists employ media frames in their decision of what to include in a news story and what not to include. This happens either consciously or instinctively. It could also be as a result of some culture-based demands. Just like a picture frame gives attention to some details while relegating other piece of information to the background, media frames draw the audience attention to certain parts of the news story. In other words, media frames emphasize some aspect of reality, de-emphasize other aspects, and leave out some aspects totally.

According to Benford & Snow (2000: 615), media framing has three important functions of "diagnosing a problem (diagnostic framing), proposing solutions and tactics (prognostic framing) and offering rules for corrective actions (motivational framing)". These various functions of framing are aimed at identification of a problem, apportioning of responsibility and redressing of a problem situation. Aligning with the foregoing, Kuypers (2009:190) states that:

> Framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organizing idea.

Underscoring how media frames are better operationalized, Entman (1993:52) stated that "to frame, is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". These explanations and definitions offer the background upon which media framing of China's engagement in other nations is considered in this study.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study stems from the fact that the various parts of research such as theory, literature review, method of data gathering and analysis, are interrelated. The various parts make up one research organism which forms part of an on-going global scholarly conversation (Olorunnisola, 2007). Theories propounded in a discipline are meant to be engaged by scholars and researchers in the discipline. The implication is that the researchers continue to examine the tenability of the theory within specified research contexts. On the other hand, researchers strive to employ appropriate theoretical construct in their studies. Thus, theories are always subjected to revision, critical examination and remodelling to make them relevant to current studies.

Furthermore, this study is an effort to dissect existing literature in the context of media coverage of China's engagement in Africa. Thus, this study is an effort to:

- Find out the most frequently adopted research method in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other countries.

- To examine the sampling techniques adopted in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other nations.

- The find out the methods of data analysis adopted in studies investigating media coverage of China's engagement in other countries.

Methodology

The study gathered data from various scholarly articles published in recognised academic journals and thesis accessed online through *Google Scholar* and *Proquest*. The articles were collated and identified based on those that focused their issues on media portrayal of China in other countries especially African nations. Almost all the studies were conducted using Framing theory as the theoretical framework between 2011 to 2016. The data were collected from 12 published journal articles and 3 research theses. The articles were drawn from the following journals:

1. *The China Monitor*
2. *Journal of African Studies*
3. *Intercultural Communication Studies*
4. *Chinese Journal of Communication*
5. *Chinese Monitor*
6. *Canadian Journal of Communication*

The journal articles and dissertations, which range between 2011 and 2016, were purposively selected from research databases. All the selected studies were hinged on framing theory or a combination of framing and other theories. Fifteen studies, both articles and dissertations, were employed in this study. These studies were content analysed.

The categories for this study involved a research method, sampling techniques and method of data analysis. Hence, the research method shows the various research methods employed in each of the studies reviewed here with their sub-categories mapped out (interview, focus group discussions, content analysis, survey, field observation and case studies). Secondly, the sampling techniques reveal the type of sampling technique that was adopted in the various studies reviewed for this work with sub-categories mapped out as multi-stage sampling, purposive, simple random, stratified and snowballing. And thirdly, the method of data analysis shows the specific methods that were used in the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data with sub-categories that emanated from the method of data analysis category such as: Pearson moment correlation/ correlation co-efficient, multiple regression, inferential statistics, t-test, Anova, Cronbach alpha test, Chi-square, descriptive statistics, constant comparative technique, pattern matching, structural equation modelling, hierarchy linear models, simple percentages, spatial analysis, content analysis, computer aided content analysis, and other types of data analysis applicable in some of the reviewed studies.

Findings and Discussion

Fifteen journal articles and theses reviewed showed that journal articles represented 86.7 % (n=13) of the reviewed studies while the theses represented 13.3 % (n=2) of the review studies. Table 1 shows the method of data collection employed in the reviewed studies. All the articles and thesis reviewed clearly stated the methodologies used. The methodologies included sampling technique, data collection, and data analysis.

Table 1   Research Method Adopted By Reviewed Studies

Research Method(s)	Reviewed Studies	
	No	%
Framing Analysis, Content Analysis and Document Review	1	6.7
Framing Analysis and In-depth Interview	1	6.7
Content Analysis	5	33.3
Framing Analysis and Content Analysis	5	33.3
Computerized Content Analysis	1	6.7
Framing Analysis and Content Analysis and In-depth Interview	1	6.7
Framing Analysis	1	6.7
Total	**15**	**100**

Table 1 shows that 33.3% (n=5) of the reviewed studies used Content Analysis as their research method; 33.3% (n=5) of the reviewed studies employed Framing Analysis and Content Analysis as their research method; 6.7% (n=1) of the reviewed studies employed Framing Analysis, Content Analysis and Document Review as their research method; 6.7% (n=1) of the reviewed works used Framing Analysis and In-depth Interview as their research method; 6.7% (n=1) of the reviewed works employed Computerized Content Analysis as their research method; 6.7% (n=1) of the reviewed works used Framing Analysis, Content Analysis and In-depth Interview; 6.7% (n=1) of the reviewed studies employed only Framing Analysis as their research method.

It is worthy to note that five of the studies reviewed did not state the research methods in their abstracts. Majority of the studies adopted Content Analysis as their research method. Most of the reviewed studies (93.4%) were conducted in African nations. This offers better perspective in the effort to understand how the media frame China's engagement in Africa nations. This also creates a better research atmosphere in the effort to understand how the African audience of the selected media perceive China's engagement in Africa.

Sampling Technique

Table 2 shows that the sampling techniques adopted by the reviewed studies are purposive and convenience sampling technique.

Table 2   Sampling Techniques in the Reviewed Studies

Sampling Technique	Reviewed Studies	
	No	%
Purposive Sampling	12	80
Convenience Sampling	3	20
Total	**15**	**100**

Most of the reviews studies (80%) adopted purposive sampling technique. This is based on the fact that such studies selected research data that possessed the characteristics appropriate for the research. The implication is that even studies that used mixed method research approach sought their data through purposive sampling. On the other hand, 20% of the reviewed studies employed convenience sampling technique. This implied that they researchers conducted their studies with readily available data.

Majority of the articles (86.7%, n=13) clearly described the population of study and stated the sample size. The other reviewed studies (13.3%, n=2) did not clearly define the population of the study. The implication is that understanding how the concerned researchers got their samples for study became difficult.

Method of Data Collection

Table 3 shows the method of data collection employed by the reviewed studies. It reveals that many of the studies collected their research data through the use of content categories.

Table 3   Method of Data Collection Adopted By Reviewed Studies

Method(s) of Data Collection	Reviewed Studies	
	No	%
Content Categories	6	40
Framing Devices	5	33.3
Record Review	1	6.7
In-depth Interview Guide	2	13.4
Computerized Content Categories	1	6.7
Total	**15**	**100**

Forty percent (40%) of reviewed studies used content categories to collect their data for research; 33.3% of reviewed studies employed framing devices in the collection of data; very few reviewed studies employed record review and computerized content categories as a method of data collection; 13.4% of reviewed studies used in-depth interview guide in the collection of data. The implication of this breakdown is that content categories and framing devices are the major methods of data collection in studies on media framing of China's engagement in other nations.

Methods of Data Analysis

Majority of the reviewed studies employed more than one method of data analysis. Five (5) of the reviewed studies employed at least one method of data analysis. This is because they employed one research method. Table 4 captures the method of data analysis of reviewed studies.

Table 4: Method of Data Analysis in Reviewed Studies

Method of Data Analysis	Reviewed Studies	
	No	%
Descriptive Analysis, Interpretative Analysis	4	27
Descriptive Analysis	3	20
Deductive Frame Analysis	7	47
Theme Mapping	1	6
Total	15	100

Most of the reviewed studies (47%, n=7) employed deductive frame analysis discourse as their method of data analysis. Seven (7) of the reviewed works used deductive frame analysis in that regard.

Emanating Trends

Trends from the study show that majority of the reviewed studies used content analysis, framing analysis or both as their research method. Studies that employed frame analysis and content analysis had richer findings than the ones that employed only one research method.

Also, most of the reviewed studies employed purposive sampling as the sampling technique in their research. Purposive sampling enables the researchers to select only the samples that meet certain criteria for the study being conducted.

An assessment of the method of data collection shows that most of the reviewed studies employed content categories and framing devices in the collection of data or each of them separately. Thus, the trend shows that content categories and framing devices are the major methods of data collection in studies on media framing of China's engagement in other nations.

For the method of data analysis, 7 of the reviewed studies employed deductive frame analysis discourse. Deductive frame analysis discourse implies that the researcher set out with certain frames generated by literature before conducting the research.

Conclusion

This study critiques the research methodologies employed in previous research that examined media framing of China's engagement in other nations. The method of data collection, sampling technique and methods of data analysis employed in prior empirical studies in the framing of China's activities in other nations were critically reviewed. The reviewed studies were conducted by both African and non-African researchers. These studies focused on the way the media framed or reported China's engagement in different countries. Also, one of the studies examined the views of media audience about China's engagement in Nigeria using online survey of journalist on LinkedIn page (Umejei, 2015). Most of the previous studies were qualitative except the study that employed survey. It is suggested that more research should engage the media audiences to know their perception of China's engagement in their respective nations.

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