

Friends and Enemies: How Government-Controlled Media in China Delegitimizes Foreign Media

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Abstract.

There is substantial scholarship examining how states use negative propaganda and threat framing of outgroups to various ends, including popular mobilization, diversion and scapegoating, and to delegitimize threats. There is less systematic research on how authoritarian regimes negatively frame international media, a group with powerful agenda-setting capabilities. Using the case of China, I show how the state employs anti-foreign-media propaganda in response to external threats. To quantify anti-foreign-media propaganda, I apply a semi-supervised text scaling method to over 17,000 Chinese state media articles from 2014 to 2023. I find that hostile framing towards foreign media sharply increased from 2019 to 2022, and that external threat events that were media-related – such as the UK regulator’s revocation of CGTN’s license in 2021 – drive this hostile framing. By focusing on authoritarian threat framing towards international media, this paper furthers our understanding of information politics in authoritarian settings.

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Introduction

In March 2021, BBC journalist John Sudworth left China after nearly a decade of reporting in the country, citing surveillance, threats of legal action, and “months of personal attacks and disinformation from Chinese authorities and state media” (The Guardian, 2021). For his reporting on topics like Xinjiang and the origins of the coronavirus, Sudworth has been accused by Chinese state media of manipulating interviewees, concocting fake news, and being a “tool for systematic ideological attacks on China” (Global Times Chinese, 2021). Sudworth’s case also prompted a rare public statement from the European Union, which called to attention the fact that in 2020, at least 18 foreign correspondents have been driven out of China “as a result of continuous harassment and obstruction to their work” (European External Action Service, 2021).

Four months later, while reporting on deadly flooding in China’s Henan province, two foreign journalists – Alice Su of the Los Angeles Times and Matthias Boelinger of Deutsche Welle – were mobbed and threatened by members of the public. Videos of the incident, which were shared on social media, showed people surrounding the journalists and extolling them to produce reports that are truthful, positive, and uncritical of China (Badiuca, 2021). The incident was widely believed to have been instigated by the Henan Communist Youth League. On Weibo, a Chinese social media network, it had asked its 1.6 million followers to follow and stop foreign journalists from spreading rumours (Yuan, 2021; Baptista and Lau, 2021).

The above are extreme examples of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s media campaigns that use hostile rhetoric, oftentimes anti-foreign in nature, to delegitimize international media in China. Are these extreme examples isolated incidents, or is there a broader pattern and logic behind the targeting of foreign media? While accounts from the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC¹) suggest that state-sanctioned anti-foreign propaganda aimed at Western media has intensified in recent years², there is limited systematic

research on this topic. The use of hostile framing towards foreign media is a form of negative propaganda, which I term anti-foreign-media propaganda. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of CCP regime resilience by studying this strategy of state legitimation. To illustrate anti-foreign-media propaganda, consider the below statement made by a spokesperson at a routine press conference by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020).

In fact, [some Western individuals and institutions] seem to have developed a routine for manufacturing and peddling lies and rumours to attack China. First, rumours are packaged as information leaked by "scholars" and "victims", which are then hyped up by media, and followed by official intervention. [...] For example, Adrian Zenz and some others cooked up the so-called Xinjiang-related reports and articles by fabricating cases and taking words out of context, making false accusations of "forced sterilization", "forced labour" and "genocide" in Xinjiang. These reports and articles were then peddled by Western media like BBC and ABC and cited by some Western politicians as excuses to initiate Xinjiang-related bills and demand sanctions against Xinjiang.

In the statement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry presents Xinjiang-related sanctions as a geopolitical plot to contain China. It omits addressing credible claims of widespread arbitrary detentions of Uyghurs and focuses instead on selectively denying strongly-worded charges of forced sterilization, forced labour, and genocide. Individuals, such as researcher Adrian Zenz, and Western media institutions like the BBC and the ABC, are portrayed as knowing or unknowing pawns of geopolitics, as they manufacture and amplify for politicians, the arguments needed for the imposition of sanctions on China. By omitting source material (for example, the full reports by the BBC) through systematic censorship, and tapping on a foundational anti-foreignism, ordinary processes of international journalism are framed as a coordinated "routine".

By analysing the use of anti-foreign-media propaganda in China, this paper makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on propaganda and legitimation by focusing on threats the state discredits rather than the positive messages it amplifies. Such negative

propaganda matters, because manipulated evaluations of relative gratification (for example, the playing up of foreign political crises to relative domestic stability) can shape pro-regime attitudes (Fu, 2023; Huang, 2015a) and contribute to authoritarian stability. Second, it contributes to the literature on anti-media or anti-press attitudes, drawing attention to challenges faced by international journalists – producers of knowledge for the global information ecosystem – from state-directed propaganda.

Since Chinese citizens cannot easily access international media content in the first place, anti-foreign-media propaganda does not lead its believers to boycott international news, rather, it causes “relational harm aimed at the “Others” of a state’s narrative” (Fisher-Onar, 2022, p2). For example, public accounts³ have shown how resident foreign journalists in China have faced “threats, sabotage, and violence from members of the public who have been paid or mobilized through indoctrination to obstruct them”.⁴ In ongoing research, I investigate how forms of press obstruction that involve indirect ‘channeling’ (Earl, 2011), such as the amplification of anti-foreign-media propaganda, are far more crucial for controlling the field than forms of obstruction which are more directly coercive, like press expulsions (DeButts and Pan 2024). This line of inquiry builds on scholarship emphasizing forms of control and repression that are more subtle and indirect (Stern and Hassid 2012; Deng and O’Brien 2013; Guriev and Treisman 2019) in contemporary authoritarian states.

I will use the term ‘foreign media’⁵ throughout, to primarily refer to media outlets headquartered in Western liberal democracies. While there are excellent journalists from non-Western media outlets who produce independent and critical reporting on China, the focus on Western media reflects the underlying assumption that Western media are perceived by the Chinese leadership as the most salient targets for discursive countering (Xi, 2013). I also theorize that foreign journalists are collateral damage during geopolitical conflicts, and they are targeted by the Chinese state with anti-foreign-media propaganda with greater intensity

during these threat events. Overall, by delegitimizing foreign journalists, the state achieves two objectives. Firstly, it defends its authoritarian public sphere (Dukalskis, 2017) by causing ordinary citizens to disregard news about China originating from unsanctioned sources. Secondly, it mobilizes nationalistic citizens to defend the state against ‘foreign slanderers’. Seen in this light, delegitimizing propaganda is a significant addition to tools routinely used by authoritarian regimes to maintain message control internally (Dukalskis, 2021).

To determine what the Chinese state is telling its citizens about foreign media, I gather over 17,000 Chinese-language news articles from state media outlets that mention foreign media and apply a semi-supervised scaling method to the dataset. Scoring the articles in terms of how hostile or friendly the foreign press is framed; I find that hostile framing sharply increased from 2019 to 2022. I also assess the relationship between geopolitical conflict events and anti-foreign-media propaganda in regression models and find that there is variation in threat perception. For instance, state media hostility towards foreign media is more likely to follow certain events, such as the UK’s ban on Chinese state broadcaster CGTN. These findings, corroborated with manual inspection and human coding, contribute to our understanding of information politics in authoritarian settings.

Theory and Hypotheses

Situating Anti-Foreign-Media Propaganda

There is substantial scholarship examining how states use threat framing of outgroups to various ends, including popular mobilization (Shesterinina, 2016, Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), diversion and scapegoating (Alrababa’h and Blaydes, 2021; Adena et al. 2015), and legitimation (Krishnarajan and Tolstrup, 2023; Bleck and Michelitch 2017). In the Chinese context, the state has employed such negative propaganda frames to delegitimize liberal democracies (Deng 2025; Chester 2024), to mobilize the masses in foreign policy disputes

(Weiss, 2013; Wong et al., 2023), and to delegitimize rights activists and ethnic dissidents as criminal elements or as operating under foreign influence (Yang, 2023; He, 2017; Arnon et al., 2023).

External threat framing in contemporary China has tended to focus on the West, due to reasons including ideological competition and Western willingness to advocate for democratic change in authoritarian regimes (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). Chinese state media has historically flagged foreign media as part of ‘hostile foreign forces’, a Soviet-era term that captures governments, politicians, scholars, think tanks, and institutions in liberal democracies that are commonly seen as agents of democracy promotion and regime change.

Foreign media is perceived as threatening because of their agenda-setting role in the global information sphere (Willnat and Martin, 2012) and their normative role perceptions – including that of being a ‘watchdog’ (Hanitzsch, 2011) and a conduit for activists to publicize their causes (Chubb, 2016). For example, during the Democracy Wall movement in the late 1970s, Chinese activists used foreign media, such as VOA and BBC broadcasts, to get messages out to their compatriots (Garside, 1981). Thus, there exists a baseline suspicion and hostility towards foreign media. I posit that one way this baseline hostility manifests is in the circulation of anti-foreign-propaganda.

In propaganda and persuasion, the receiver matters as much as the message (Jowett and O’Donnell 2018). Figure 1 provides a sense of the anti-foreign-media propaganda that is studied in this paper. The headlines can appear unconvincing and performative to those who are not its intended audience. However, they can come across as credible and resonate with ingroup members because the implicit messages – that China is being wronged and bullied by outsiders – tap on collective identity beliefs and shared historical memory. Such propaganda signals to its receivers the state’s enemies, and is a means of legitimation and de-legitimation.

Figure 1. Select headlines from Chinese-language (translated) and English-language state media of China.



Motivations for using Anti-Foreign-Media Propaganda

China is widely regarded as possessing one of the most sophisticated systems of information control in the world, comprising censorship of the Internet (King et al., 2013; Lorentzen, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Han and Shao, 2022), the use of propaganda in the party press (Huang, 2015b; Carter and Carter, 2023; Mattingly and Yao, 2022), and administrative tools – aimed at internet service providers and social media companies – that ensure content from the party press dominates Chinese social media (Creemers, 2017; Chen, 2022). This begs an important question. Since most international media content is widely censored within China, why would the state risk the Streisand effect, as anti-foreign-media propaganda can potentially backfire by drawing citizens' attention to international pressure and critical reporting? There are at least three reasons for this.

First, critical reporting that resident foreign journalists generate for international audiences can make its way back into China, through overseas Chinese, social media, and the use of virtual private networks (Lu et al., 2022). Therefore, anti-foreign media-propaganda matters from the perspective of mitigating the informational effects of globalisation and maintaining control of narratives that circulate domestically.

Second, political control has tightened under Xi. State media cadres are under greater pressure to demonstrate alignment with the leadership's emphasis on safeguarding non-traditional security areas from external influence (Wang, 2022), from calling for youths to be imbued with 'cultural confidence', to waging war on historical accounts that contradicts the party's official version. Xi has also exhorted the public to guard against Western ideas of journalism and civil society (Chinese Communist Party, 2013; Xi, 2015) and curtailed discussion of liberal ideas such as constitutional democracy and human rights (Xi, 2013). These efforts result in the politicization of and increased negative propaganda towards foreign media.

Third, there is grassroots demand for anti-foreign rhetoric, and state media is at times reflecting, rather than driving, anti-foreign, nationalist beliefs (Fu, 2023; Zhao, 2000). In China, where strong collective identity beliefs centre around the nation⁶, historical narratives highlight chosen traumas and chosen glories (Wang, 2014), emphasize victimhood identity (Renwick and Cao, 1999; Woods and Dickson, 2017; Xu and Zhao, 2023), and assert "alternative non-liberal particularistic identities and moral orders" (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020, p569). These beliefs foster outgroup resentment and the psychological need to maintain collective self-esteem (Gries, 2004; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019), thus reinforcing popular demand for anti-foreign-media propaganda.

Chinese Perceptions of Foreign Media and External Threats

Anti-foreign discourse has its roots in pre-revolutionary nationalist anti-imperialism. Under the CCP, such discourse was instrumentalized in “Mao’s friend/enemy dichotomization of life” (Dutton, 2005, p264) that distinguishes “between patriotic Chinese on the one hand, and evil foreigners and their Chinese race-traitors on the other” (Callahan, 2009, p56). This binary world view has strengthened in recent years with the rise of ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomats like the former Ambassador to Sweden Gui Congyou, who espoused a more coercive foreign policy approach of ‘treating friends with fine wine and enemies with shotguns’ (Axios, 2020).

Revisionist former empires such as China resent Western moral authority while simultaneously striving to enhance their standing within the Western-dominated international system (Fisher-Onar, 2022). This results in a paradoxical, ‘friends and enemies’ rhetorical pattern that at times rebuke the West, and at times clamour for the approval of the West. When applied to international media, we see the state responding to real or perceived criticism in news reports by framing critical, muckraking foreign journalists as hostile, while framing those who produce reports that validate Chinese positions and achievements as friendly. Although friendly framing tends to apply to foreign journalists who are employed by Chinese state media⁷, they occasionally apply to ‘enemies’, as long as positive reporting on China is involved. For example, state-backed media outlet The Paper (2024) reposted content from a BBC report and played up the BBC reporter’s positive evaluations of the burgeoning speciality coffee in China, thereby recognizing the authority of a media outlet often denounced as untrustworthy⁸.

Anti-foreign-media propaganda, much like Shambaugh’s (1996) characterization of Chinese nationalism, tends to be defensive and reactive. What is less clear, is what does anti-foreign propaganda primarily react to? I argue that it tends to be issued in response to a threat, defined as a positive probability that one state has the means and the motivation to harm the security of another state (Wallander and Keohane, 1999). Such threats emanate externally and

include international pressure on social realities that are at odds with official state narratives, like human rights violations in Xinjiang and the erosion of political freedoms in Hong Kong. For example, Gruffydd-Jones (2019) has shown that international human rights pressure on China that originates from the United States is 118% more likely to be reported by Chinese state media than pressure from other Western sources, while pressure from non-Western nations was barely reported. It is obvious that there is variation in threat perception, and not all threat actors and actions are perceived equally. In this paper, I test the idea that anti-foreign-media propaganda is likely to follow media-related threat events, of which there were plenty in the last five years. Apart from the UK's ban on CGTN in 2021, in 2020 the US designated Chinese state media outlets as 'foreign missions' and restricted their journalist quotas. That same year, Australian intelligence agents raided the homes of journalists working for Chinese state media and seized their devices. This line of argument leads to two hypotheses:

H1: Surges in China's anti-foreign-media propaganda are more likely to follow certain external threat events compared to others, indicating variation in threat perception.

H2: Among the threat events, media-related measures elicit a larger increase in China's anti-foreign-media propaganda than other types of events.

In the following section, I describe the text and event data used to construct the outcome and explanatory variables for the regression analysis.

Methodology

Threat Event Data

There is an established tradition within political science that uses event data to make sense of what motivates official rhetoric. In the Chinese context for example, Carter and Carter (2022) showed that the government pre-empts social unrest by employing propaganda-based threats of repression “chiefly around the time of anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang regions, and secondarily by major political anniversaries” (p672). Meanwhile, Wang (2021) found that the government uses media campaigns during foreign policy disputes to “to align public opinion with their preferred foreign policy for purposes of both domestic regime survival and international security” (p519).

While custom-built event data is suitable for research questions where the regression variable is well-defined, such as political anniversaries, applying it in this paper might result in selection bias as the universe of external threats or geopolitical conflicts is large. Thus, I turn to an off-the-shelf dataset, POLitical Event Classification, Attributes, and Types (POLECAT). Projects like Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), or the Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS), and its successor POLECAT (Scarborough et al., 2023) use natural language processing to parse text and determine who did what to whom where and when.

Filtering the POLECAT dataset for material and verbal conflict actions initiated by all states towards China, with the primary actor and recipient sectors specified as ‘Government’ and ‘Journalism’, I retrieved 75 events. After removing low-frequency country actors (those with three actions and fewer), removing events that represent states’ symbolic protesting of Chinese-initiated actions and behaviour (as opposed to concrete, unilateral actions) and consolidating similar events that occur around the same time, I end up with 47 threat events⁹. These were accounted for by five country actors (the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and Japan)

and spread over five hand-coded event categories (media, economic, diplomatic, Hong Kong/Taiwan, and Tibet/Xinjiang). For each event date, I create a binary ‘treatment’ indicator equal to 1 if an article’s publication date falls within the 28-day post-event window and 0 otherwise.

Text Data, Scaling, and Validation

Since this paper is interested in what the state is telling citizens about international reportage, I apply text-as-data methods to Chinese-language articles. The dataset comprises news articles from Chinese state media outlets, namely the Global Times, People’s Daily, and Xinhua News Agency,¹⁰ and is created by searching for the term “foreign media”, “Western media”, and 14 synonyms in Chinese¹¹ from a global electronic news database. I retrieved 17,697 articles¹², covering a 10-year period from January 2014 to December 2023.

Following the intuition that “computational text analysis can be used to model [states’] characterization of foreign actions and policies as friendly or hostile” (Trubowitz and Watanabe, 2021, p2), I leverage the existence of the aforementioned hostile and friendly frames to apply a semi-supervised text scaling method, Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS). LSS is a cost- and computationally- efficient way to scale documents accurately, and it has been widely used in political science and international relations research to construct regression variables from text data¹³.

LSS positions the news articles on a unidimensional scale based on a small set of keywords chosen by the user (Watanabe, 2021a)¹⁴. The keywords, known as seed words, describe two ends of a unidimensional scale, in this case, hostile and friendly framing. The seed words¹⁵ in the ‘hostile’ frame describe how the state views conventional international journalism – journalists with an ‘anti-China’ ‘bias’, who ‘distort’ the truth, and ‘smear’ China. On the other hand, the ‘friendly’ frame describes how journalists ought to conduct themselves in the eyes of the Marxist-Leninist propaganda apparatus¹⁶ – to provide support for official

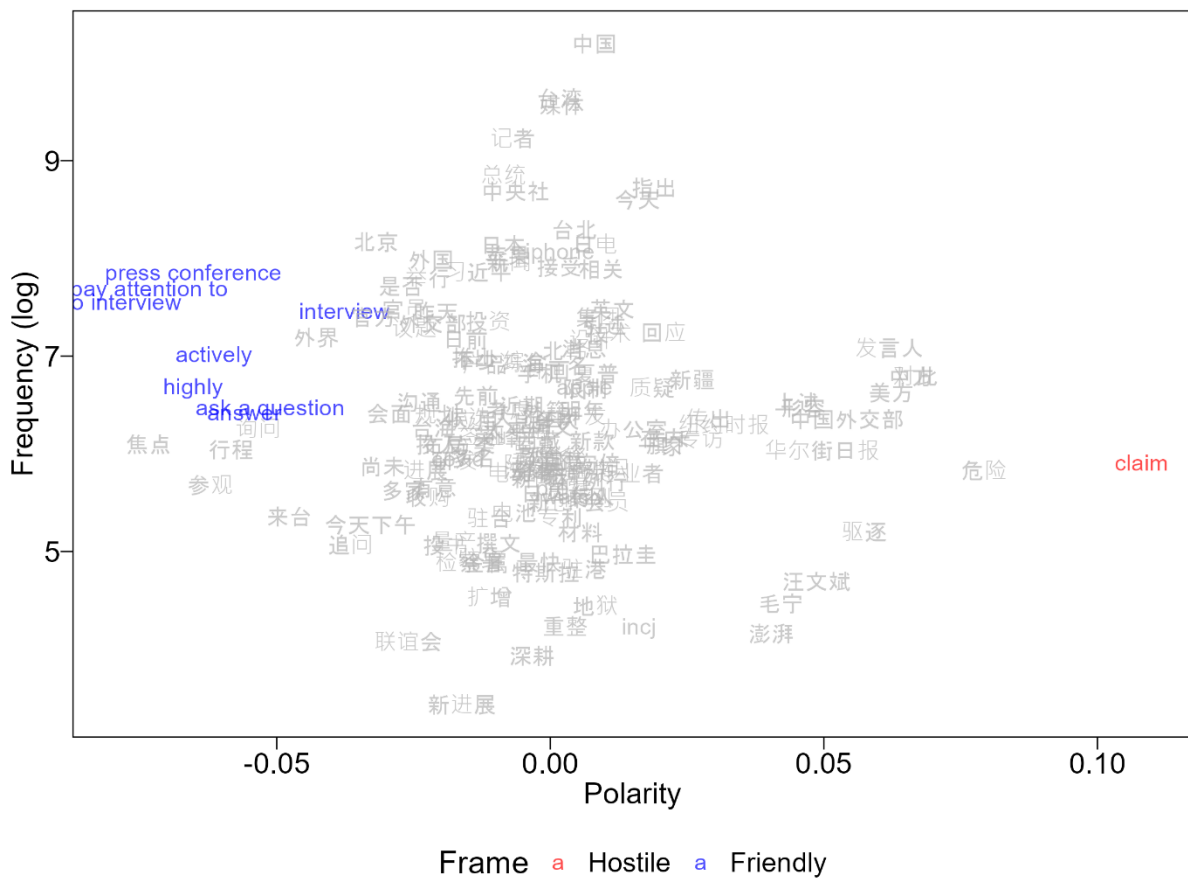
policies by being ‘optimistic/upbeat’, by ‘asking [pre-authorized] questions’ at stage-managed ‘press briefings’, and by relying on ‘authoritative information’ from state organs. Importantly, the hostile terms form what Schurmann (1968) calls “the language of ideology”, which, when translated but unexplained, “will always appear jargonistic” and be dismissed as propaganda (p64) to an external audience. However, far from being unconvincing and theatrical, this propaganda – as mentioned earlier – speaks to an internal audience who are sensitized to the terminology and its changes.

The user also needs to specify model terms that capture the target dimension, which is in this case, is foreign media. LSS collects words (based on a default context window of ± 10 words¹⁷) that occur frequently around user-specified model terms. These model terms consist of the original 16 search terms as well as 17 terms, such as “media and politicians”, “Australian media”, “American media”, “Japanese media”, “Canadian media”, and “British media”, in order to reflect theory and the country actors captured in the threat event data¹⁸.

LSS uses a word embedding technique based on Latent Semantic Analysis (Deerwester et al. 1990) to estimate the semantic proximity based on cosine similarity scores between the user-specified seed words and all other words in the text corpus. First, the algorithm computes polarity scores of words related to the model terms based on their proximity with the seed words in the latent semantic space (Figures 2 and 3). Words near zero on the horizontal axis are neutral, “in the sense that they are at the same semantic distance from seed words” on either side (Trubowitz and Watanabe, 2021, p5). Next, it aggregates the word scores at the article level – weighting each word by its frequency and then taking the average – so that each news article in the corpus receives one overall polarity score or LSS score. These article-level scores are centered at zero and normalized by their standard deviation for interpretability. While zero itself has no substantive meaning, changes in an article’s LSS score indicate changes in framing by state media (Figure 4).

As a robustness check, I collected Chinese-language articles from Taiwan’s Central News Agency and Singapore’s Lianhe Zaobao, by searching for the term “foreign media” and its synonyms in Chinese. This second dataset, comprising 7,038 articles over the same period, serves as a non-propagandised dataset. Applying LSS with the same parameters as above, it is clear that the non-propagandised dataset is much more sparse and less polarized, with the polarity distribution ranging from around -0.05 to 0.1 (Figure 3), compared to around -0.1 to 0.3 for the Chinese state media dataset (Figure 2).²⁰ This suggests that the hostile/friendly frame is typical of the authoritarian language used by the Chinese state to signal to citizens, while circulating less within other Chinese-language societies.²¹

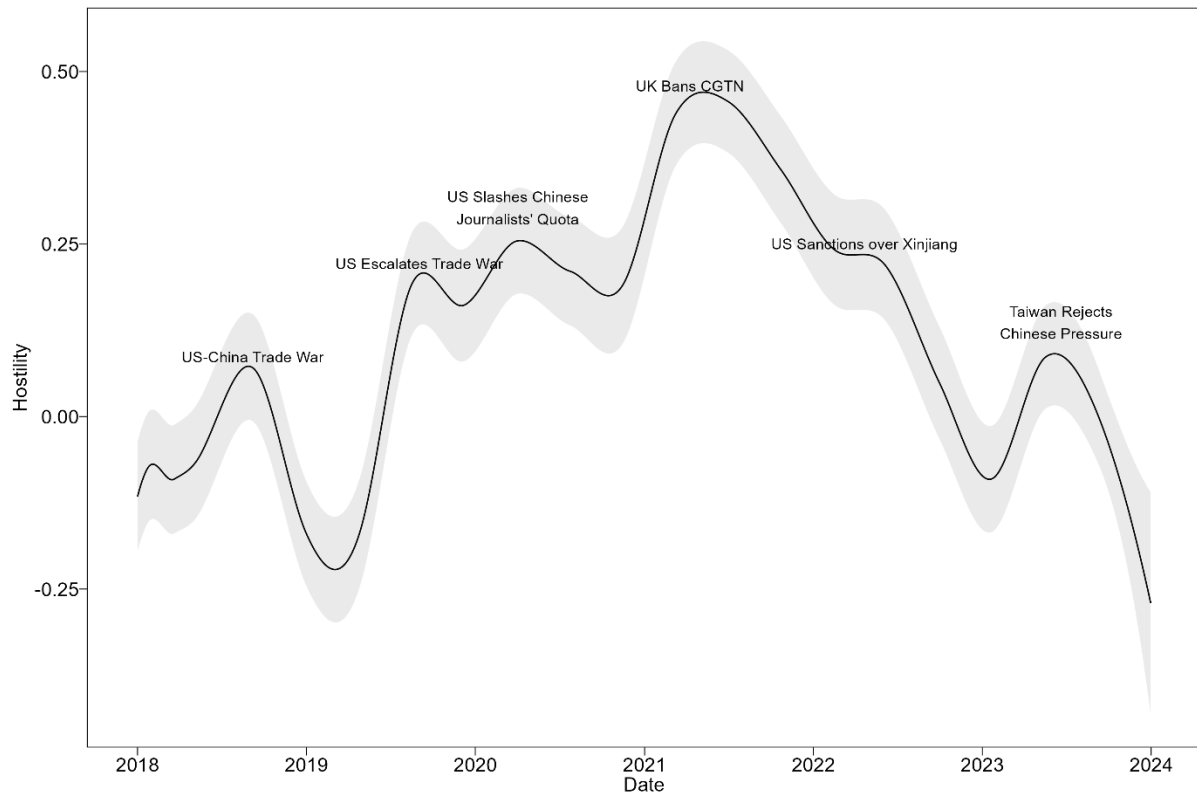
Figure 3. Polarity scores of words in the fitted LSS model for the non-propagandised dataset. The seed words are highlighted and translated.



Next, I compute article-level LSS scores with the fitted LSS model. It is the spike in these article-level scores that signals a propaganda response. These scores form the measure for anti-foreign-media propaganda and will serve as the outcome variable in the regression analysis. Figure 4 plots the daily mean article-level LSS scores (i.e. the average polarity score of all Chinese state-media articles published on that day), alongside selected threat events over 2018 to 2023. Scores above zero mark days on which Chinese state media outlets' hostility toward foreign media were, on average, more hostile than usual. Values below zero indicate relatively friendlier or more neutral language. For example, the early 2021 peak at +0.4 indicates that on those dates hostility was roughly 0.4 standard deviations above the baseline.

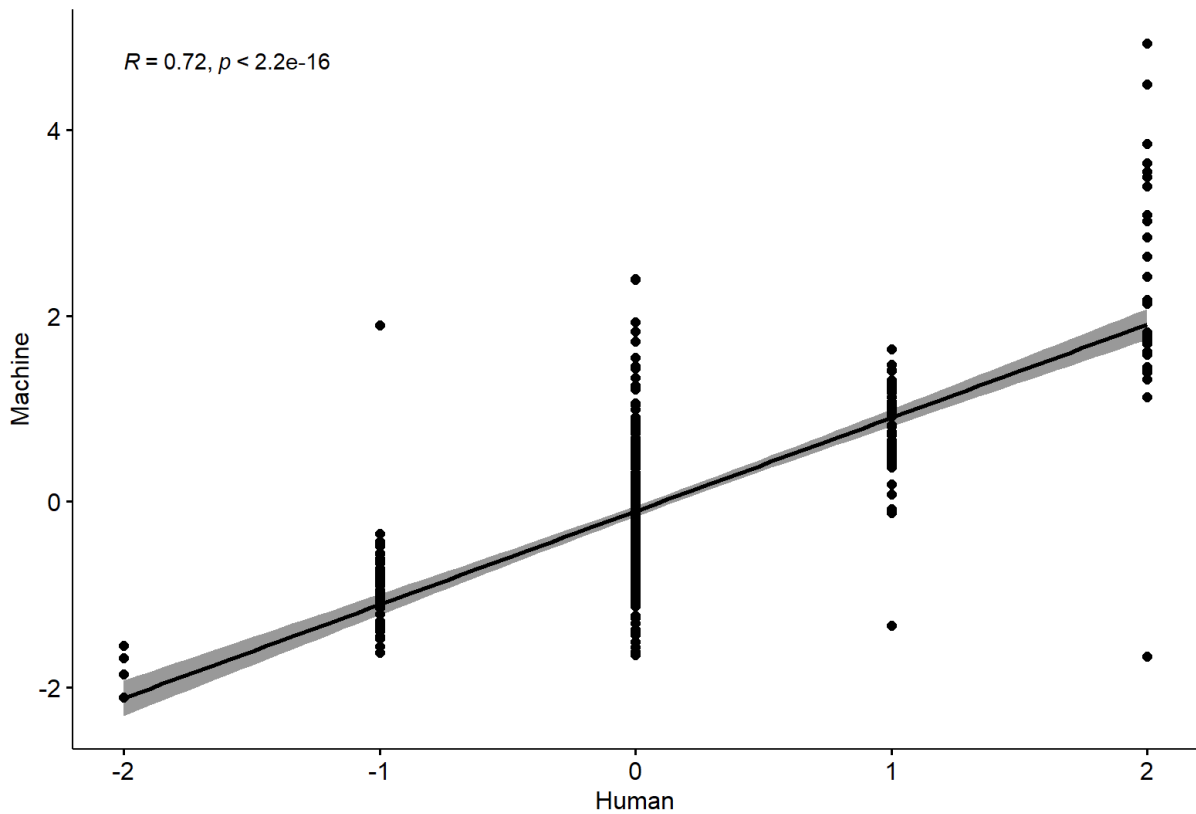
From 2019 onwards, there is a sharp rise in Chinese state media's hostility towards foreign media, in line with the surge in 'wolf-warrior' rhetoric documented by Dai and Luqiu (2022). Crucially, the spikes in hostility coincides with real-world events within the news cycle, allowing us to visually confirm the performance of the scaling method. For example, elevated levels of anti-foreign-media propaganda in 2019-2022 corresponded with a period of intense international scrutiny for China, with international pressure over matters relating to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, COVID-19 and the US-China trade war. In the next section, I use event data to test how closely these spikes in hostility correspond to external threat events.

Figure 4. Daily average LSS hostility scores (indicating changes in Chinese state media's hostile framing towards foreign media), with selected threat events annotated. The solid line is a generalized additive model with integrated smoothness and the shaded band shows a 95% confidence interval.



I validate the scaling results based on best practices in text-as-data approaches (Watanabe et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2024). Employing a native Chinese speaker, I extracted a random sample of 500 articles and manually coded them.²² The articles are first classified into one of three categories ('hostile', 'neutral', or 'friendly') depending on the degree of overall hostility towards foreign media. This means that an article containing a few uses of hostile framing will be classified as 'neutral' or even 'friendly', if it contains more neutral or friendly language overall. Next, a more detailed score on a 5-point scale, ranging from -2 to $+2$, was assigned. Figure 5 shows that the predicted scores strongly correlate with the manual scores ($r = 0.72$; $p < 2.2e-16$), thereby supporting the measurement validity of the LSS scaling approach.

Figure 5. Correlation of the LSS scores by human and machine classification.



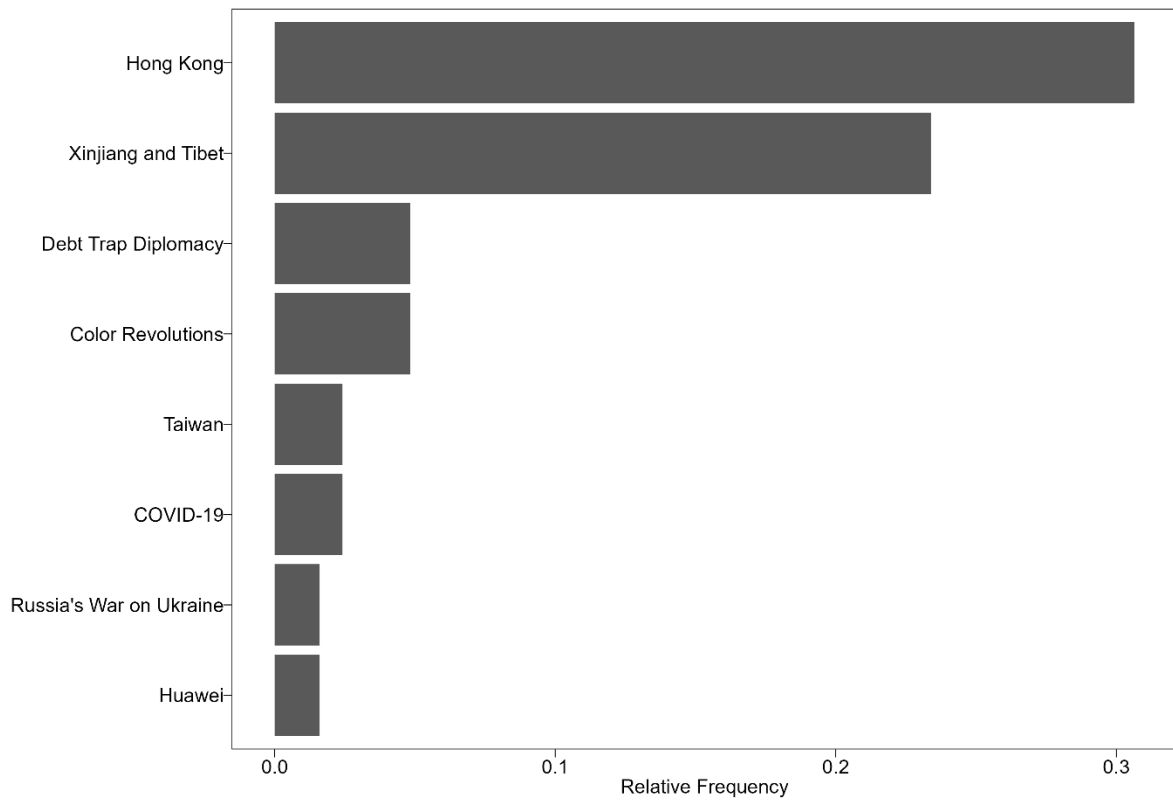
Findings

Qualitative Coding

Before running the regression analysis, I extracted for manual inspection the most highly rated articles in terms of hostile framing (LSS score > 3) in the 2019-2022 period. This is done to ascertain whether high LSS scores primarily detect anti-foreign-media propaganda. I retrieved 124 articles in total and coded each article for the topics (Figure 6) and the targets of China's hostile framing (Figure 7). Two patterns emerge that speak directly to the construct validity of the scaling approach.

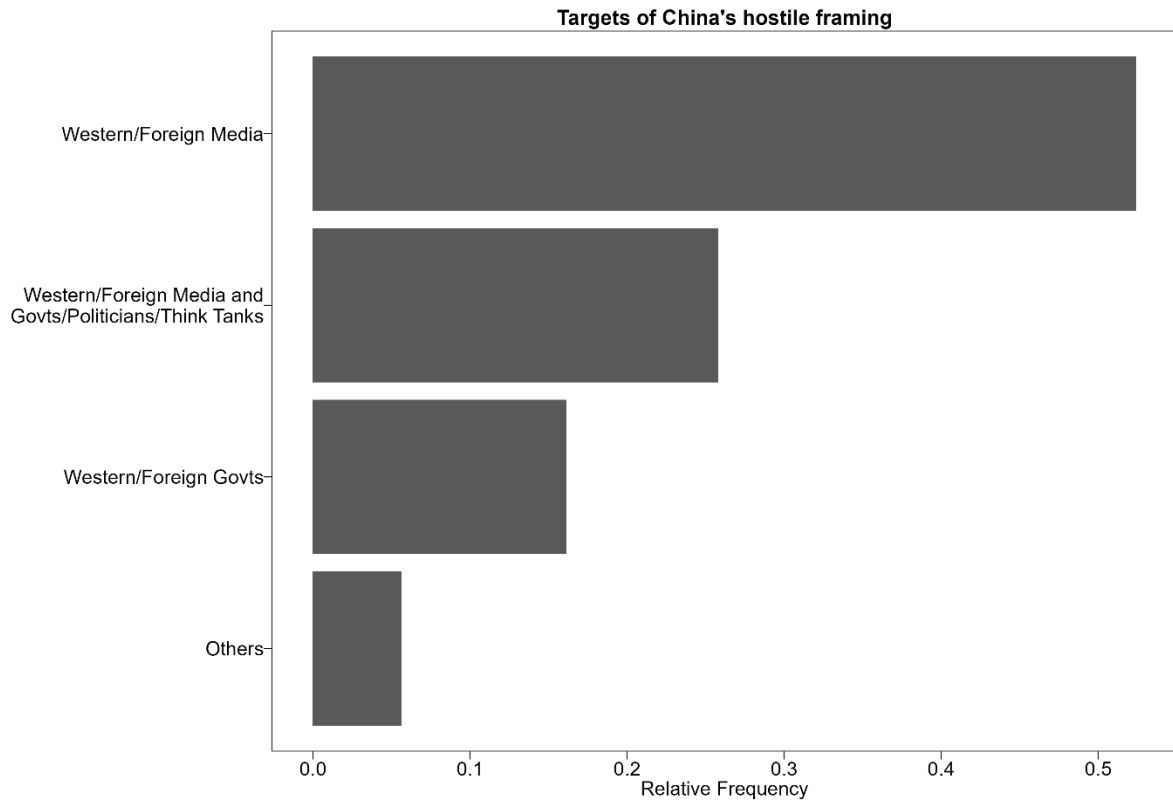
Figure 6 shows that 60% of the most-hostile articles concern Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang and Tibet, and colour revolutions – topics that closely relate to China's stated 'core interests' of national sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, and safeguarding its political system (Government of the PRC, 2011). These are precisely the flashpoints where Chinese state media activate hostile framing against foreign media and foreign media reporting.

Figure 6. Topic proportions within the sample.



More than half of the hand-coded articles target only Western or foreign media. Including articles that attack foreign media in combination with governments, politicians, or think tanks, the share of the sample rises to 80% (Figure 7). Only 16% of articles single out foreign governments alone, a pattern that reflects a tendency in CCP propaganda to conflate the press with policy actors.

Figure 7. Top targets of China's hostile language within the sample.



Regression Analysis

As the POLECAT data is only available from 2018, the regression sample spans January 2018 to December 2023 and comprises 8,969 articles. I estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with the event dummies as the explanatory variable and the LSS scores as the outcome variable, controlling for month fixed effects and volume of country mentions²³. I also report standard errors clustered at the publication-date level. The primary specification estimates the intensity of hostile framing as a function of exposure to discrete threat events in the preceding 28 days²⁴. I use the following model:

$$lss_t = \beta_0 + \sum_k \beta_k D_{k,t} + \sum_j \gamma_j month_{j,t} + \sum_c \delta_c mention_{c,t} + \varepsilon_t$$

where $D_{k,t}$ is a binary indicator that equals 1 if day t falls within the 28-day window following event k , $month_{j,t}$ are monthly fixed-effect dummies, and $mention_{c,t}$ is the raw count of media mentions for each country actor c on day t . By including month fixed effects, the model absorbs seasonal shifts in baseline hostile rhetoric, and by controlling for country mentions, it nets out fluctuations in general media attention on the five country actors. Clustering standard errors at the publication-date level accounts for within-day correlation.

I started with a ‘kitchen sink’ specification (Model 0) that tests each of the 47 discrete events. As the sheer number of coefficients makes interpretation impractical, I then estimated three aggregated specifications: Models 1, 2, and 3, which aggregated the events by actors, event types, and by actor + event type combinations respectively²⁵. As a robustness check, Model 4 replaces each binary event dummy with POLECAT’s continuous event intensity scores. Table 1 lists the media-related events within the threat event data, alongside POLECAT machine-coded event intensity scores, and their regression coefficients and significance levels (Model 0).

Table 1. The regression coefficients and significance levels for media-related events within the threat event data, based on Model 0.

Date	Actor	Description	Event	Regression
			Intensity	Coefficients
9 September 2020	Australia	Raids homes of four Chinese state media journalists.	7	0.376*
7 September 2023	Canada	Launches public inquiry into alleged foreign meddling by China.	3	-0.065
30 August 2018	Japan	Protests reporter's barring from bilateral event.	5	0.288*

5 February 2021	UK	Revokes CGTN's license to broadcast in the UK and expels spies who posed as journalists.	3.5	0.613**
9 March 2021	UK	Fines CGTN over 'forced confessions' and HK protest coverage.	3	0.659***
2 March 2020	US	Slashes Chinese journalist quota after Beijing expels US reporters.	6	0.141
22 June 2020	US	Labels four more Chinese news outlets 'Foreign Missions'.	7	0.151
22 October 2020	US	Designates six more Chinese media outlets as foreign missions.	6	0.106

Significance: *** = $p < 0.001$; ** = $p < 0.01$; * = $p < 0.05$.

Across Models 1-3, there is clear variation in the actors and event types that drive spikes in hostile framing. In Model 1, only UK-related threat events produce a consistently large, statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), while other actors' effects hover around zero or fail to clear conventional significance thresholds. This heterogeneity offers partial support for H1. In Model 2, media-related threat events stand out with a strong positive effect ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$), while economic threat events register a smaller and only marginally robust effect ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). This confirms that media-related threat events elicit larger increases in hostile framing and strongly support H2. Model 3, which has the highest adjusted R^2 (= 0.076), sharpens this further. It shows that the UK + Media combination drives the largest response ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$). This means that a media-related measure undertaken by the UK + Media event is associated with a 0.65-point increase in hostile framing towards foreign media (as measured by daily mean article-level LSS scores).

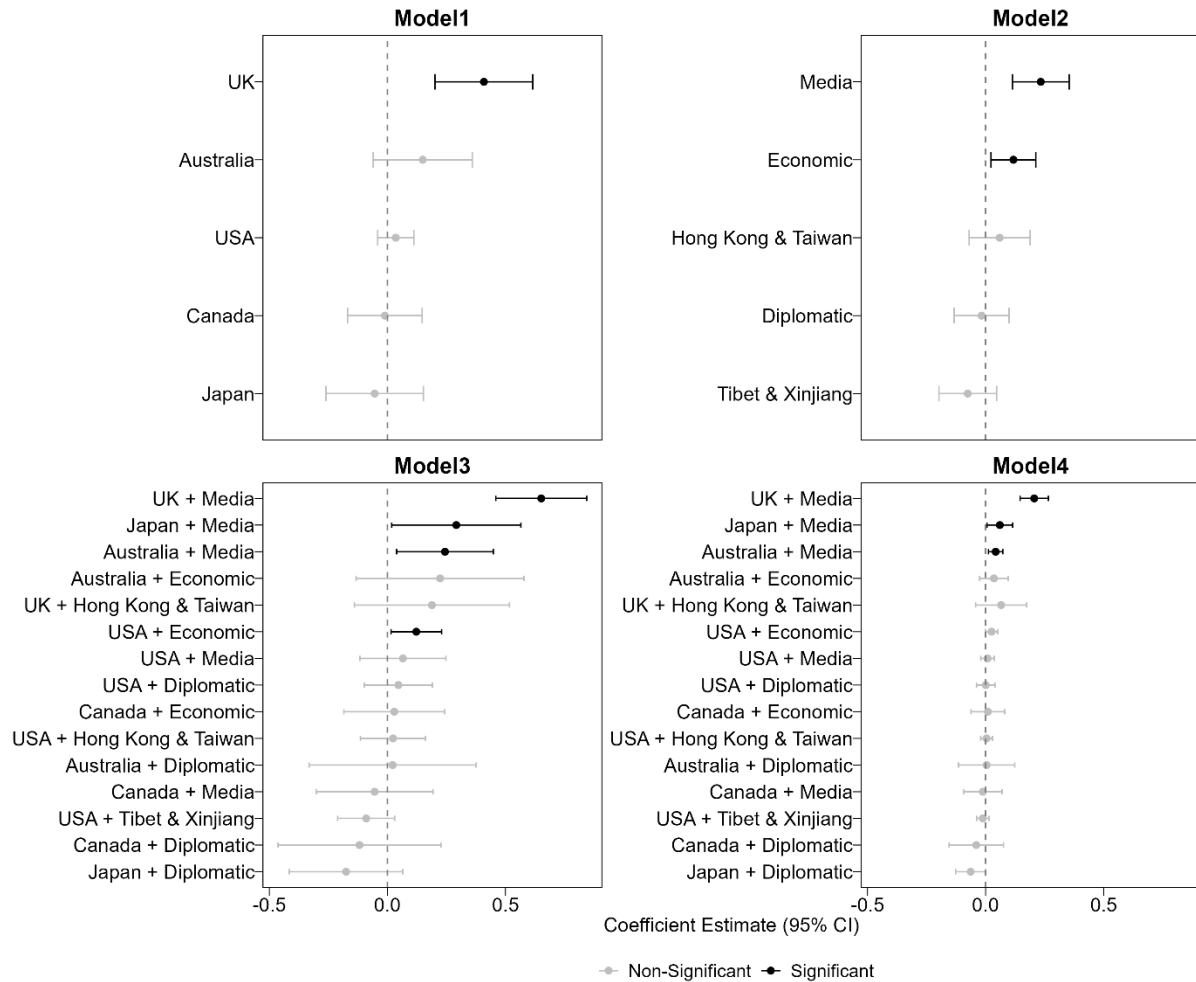
In Model 3, Japan + Media ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$) and Australia + Media ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$) also produce notable and statistically significant effects, suggesting when there is

information-sphere conflict between states, Chinese state media retaliate by rhetorically punishing foreign media. Notably, only one US actor-type combination is significant (USA + Economic, $\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$), despite a much larger number of US-initiated threat events. This suggests that frequency alone does not translate into hostile framing.

Model 4 shows that the signal survives alternative specifications. Substituting each binary dummy with POLECAT's continuous intensity measure leaves the overall fit unchanged ($R^2 = 0.076$) but with weaker coefficient magnitudes and significance levels. Critically, the UK + Media combination remains strongly significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). The attenuation is likely due to measurement noise, as machine-coded scores in off-the-shelf datasets seldom capture domain-specific nuance perfectly. Figure 8 plots the key coefficients for Models 1-4.

Overall, the regression analysis captures a slice of what shapes state media outlets' hostile framing towards foreign media. However, the event data is not exhaustive and there are many exogenous factors outside the model that also influence state media rhetoric, such as critical reporting from agenda-setting international media outlets, and domestic political events. For example, the BBC (2018) was one of the first mainstream media outlets to break the news on internment camps in Xinjiang, and its reporting has drawn strong objections from the Chinese Embassy in the UK (2020), and an assertion from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021) that “[many Chinese people now ridicule [the] BBC as “Biased Broadcasting Corporation””. In spite of a noisy backdrop, the fact that the models isolated robust and statistically significant effects around UK and media-related events attests to the substantive strength of those relationships. Further, media-related events emerge as the strongest, most consistent predictors of hostile framing, providing evidence for the construct validity of scaling approach.

Figure 8. Estimated coefficients from Models 1-3 (binary event dummies) and Model 4 (event-intensity scores). Note: Horizontal error bars show 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered at the publication-date level.



Two events in February and March 2021 drive the UK + Media coefficient. To check if the sharp increase in hostile framing in February and March 2021 is indeed attacking foreign media, I conducted a focused review of a sample (n = 16). Among the most highly rated articles in terms of hostile framing (LSS score > 2.5), 87.5% targets foreign media. Table 2 presents a selection of the sample to illustrate what qualifies as hostile framing towards foreign media.

Table 2. Key text from the hostile sample in February 2021.

Date	Text	LSS score
5 February 2021	The "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus" that appeared repeatedly in Western media last year are a kind of linguistic attack.	2.61
10 February 2021	Western media , with the support of Western political forces, used social media and other tools to spread false information about Russia on a large scale.	2.51
10 February 2021	"Some foreign media said that the teaching and training centers forced our students to work, which is a fabrication. There is no such thing at all." Xier Aili Aimerjiang, a graduate of the teaching and training center in Moyu County, Hotan Prefecture, said indignantly.	3.03
12 February 2021	In response to the recent slanderous remarks made by Western media such as the BBC on Xinjiang-related issues, South Africa's ruling coalition member and first deputy secretary-general of the South African Communist Party, Ma Peila [...] expressed his firm opposition to the false slanderous remarks.	3.64
18 February 2021	Hua Chunying said: [...] the British [...] politically suppresses CGTN, interferes with the dissemination of CGTN in the UK, and obstructs it; on the one hand, it allows British media to make false reports abroad.	2.89
18 February 2021	Wu Ken said that no matter what the Chinese government does, some Western media will always quickly conclude that "Beijing is oppressing."	4.98
24 February 2021	They have learned the facts and truth of Xinjiang on the spot and believe that what they have seen and heard in Xinjiang is completely different from what the Western media reports.	2.80
24 February 2021	Some domestic "public intellectuals" follow the Western media's arguments, accuse and attack the domestic political system.	5.31

Topic-wise, as China was then facing intense scrutiny over treatment of its Uyghur minority at the time, half of the articles relate to Xinjiang. The remaining articles relate to expounding on and defending China's positions internationally, including in conflicts with the UK, India, and the Philippines, as well as responding to claims about its actions relating to COVID-19 and to infrastructure loans in Africa. A small number of articles were less directly tied to a core or material interest, such as Chinese state media's reporting of anti-Western media remarks by the Russian Foreign Ministry. Remarks claiming that opposition figure Alexei Navalny is controlled by the West and amplified by Western media, are in political alignment with Chinese positions and similar in tenor to anti-foreign-media rhetoric used by Chinese state media to attack regime critics.

There were no specific media outlets singled out for targeting except for the BBC, which was criticised for its reporting in the context of it being blocked in China following the UK regulator's ban on CGTN (Ofcom 2021). It also namechecked for 'slandorous remarks' on Xinjiang. Although eight Xinjiang-related event dummies were included in the regression, none of them produced a statistically significant effect on the LSS scores. This suggests that the concentration of Xinjiang-related articles in February 2021 reflects a concerted publicity effort or other unobserved drivers, rather than threat events in our dataset. This underscores how multi-year geopolitical conflicts often involve cumulative, lagged, or overlapping influences that discrete event windows cannot fully capture. Modelling these longer-term, cumulative dynamics falls outside the scope of this paper, which has sought to develop a theory of anti-foreign-media propaganda, propose and validate a quantitative measure for it, and assess how discrete geopolitical triggers drive hostile framing toward foreign media.

Conclusion

This study advances both theory and measurement of anti-foreign-media propaganda by scaling a novel dataset of 17,697 Chinese state media articles. Four regression specifications deliver two robust findings. First, Chinese rhetorical retaliation towards foreign media is selective, supporting the idea that there is variation in threat perception. Second, what foreign actors do matters more than how often they act. Media-related threat events, particularly media bans, generated the strongest, most consistent jumps in hostile framing. In other words, when a foreign state act to directly curtail or suppress Beijing's ability to shape media narratives and public opinion, Chinese state media tend to react by lashing out at foreign media. This suggests that in the eyes of China's propaganda apparatus, foreign media is often – rightly or wrongly – conflated with foreign states.

More broadly, this paper speaks to research in international relations and propaganda that examines China's insecurities within the liberal world order and its preoccupation with 'discourse power' (话语权). Unlike economic or military disputes, foreign moves that undercut Beijing's ability to shape global narratives strike at a perceived core vulnerability. In Xi's world view, China was backward, poor, and lacked the ability to speak for itself and set its own narratives internationally. While the first two problems have been resolved under contemporary CCP rule, the third one is yet to be resolved, and China perceives itself to be constantly unfairly rebuked and criticized (Xinhua 2016).

There are several areas for future research. First, the analysis can be extended to the early 2000s, to capture the anti-CNN campaign in China in 2008 and compare the degree of hostile framing then. There are notable differences, however. The grassroots-driven anti-CNN campaign was widely believed to be triggered by deficiencies in reporting by Western media (Latham, 2009). Second, the analysis can be extended to social media data, including quasi-state or state-backed nationalist influencers on Weibo. Third, there is potential to extend the design to the Russian context, which shares a propaganda system and political lexicon similar to China's. Fourth, one can more deeply investigate the relationships between hostile framing and external threats with a dynamic model that allows for lagged effects and feedback loops. Fifth, future research can test audience effects – and this is something I am exploring in an ongoing online survey experiment.

There are some limitations to the approach. The seed words in the LSS scaling approach are domain-specific. While the seed words can be tweaked to measure variables other than hostility towards media, such as the degree to which rival ideologies or political systems are delegitimized, more research is needed to test their applicability beyond post-communist regimes with similar discourse legacies. In the words of Watanabe (2021, p96), "fitted LSS models have maximum internal validity but cannot be easily applied to different corpora unlike

pretrained models”. However, the strength of the approach lies in its parsimony. As it is based on word embeddings, it is easily adapted to other languages. It also delivers interpretable scores without the compute intensity or opacity of large language models, making replication and cross-country comparison straightforward.

Finally, this paper also contributes to the literature on anti-media or anti-press attitudes in society. Research in this field has focused on anti-media populism in democratic societies, but it is just as important to pay attention to delegitimizing attacks on journalists who operate in authoritarian contexts. Beyond highly visible actions such as arrests and expulsions of journalists, democracies need to be alert to how less visible tactics, like state-directed anti-foreign-media propaganda, can endanger foreign correspondents and stymie much-needed independent reporting. Democracies, newsrooms and international watchdogs should track such propaganda campaigns as they can erode journalist safety and chill critical reporting. This, in turn, allows authoritarian states to maintain message discipline within their borders, and shape the kinds of news stories that gets transmitted to global information environment.

Notes

¹ Founded in 1981, the Beijing-based FCCC is the main foreign correspondents' group in China.

² For example, nearly a quarter of respondents in the FCCC's (2021, p7) annual Media Freedom survey said they were "targeted in online smear campaigns as a result of their reporting".

³ For examples, see BBC, 2024; The Guardian, 2021.

⁴ See Lim (2025).

⁵ Additionally, due to norms of linguistic politeness (c.f. Lee, 2020), where indirect expressions are favoured, the term 'foreign media' [外国媒体, 外媒] tends to be a proxy for 'Western media' [西方媒体], which is less frequently used.

⁶ In the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020), 91.6 percent of Chinese citizens said that they were proud to be Chinese (Haerpfer et al. 2020).

⁷ For examples, see Global Times, 2022; Shine, 2024.

⁸ For example, see Xinhua, 2021.

⁹ Due to licensing restrictions, POLECAT does not provide the story text or URLs from which the events are extracted. Descriptions for each event is constructed manually through web searches based on information within the dataset. The list of the events is in Section A7 of the SIF.

¹⁰ The rationale for selecting these sources is in Section A1 of the Supplementary Information file (SIF).

¹¹ The search terms and their translations can be found in the Table A1 of the SIF.

¹² For data processing details, see Section A2 of the SIF.

¹³ See Müller et al. (2024), Zhou et al. (2025), Lankina and Watanabe (2017), and Wong (2024).

¹⁴ For details on the R package, see Watanabe (2025).

¹⁵ The seed words, and details on their selection can be found in Table A2 of the SIF.

¹⁶ For examples, see People's Daily, 2016; People's Daily, 2024.

¹⁷ The default context window of ± 10 words was selected it maximises the detection or collection of hostile framing seed words. Robustness checks for different context windows are in Section A8 of the SIF.

¹⁸ These model terms and their translations can be found in the Table A3 of the SIF.

¹⁹ By default, LSS follows Turney and Littman (2003) in performing a singular value decomposition (SVD) with $k = 300$ to the document–feature matrix to obtain word vectors, from which polarity scores are computed.

²⁰ The original, untranslated plots can be found in Section A4 of the SIF.

²¹ For more details, see Section A5 of the SIF.

²² For the Codebook, see Section A6 of the SIF.

²³ These are frequency counts computed using multi-language geographical dictionaries in Newsmap (Watanabe 2018).

²⁴ Using the disaggregated events model, Model 0, I chose the time window that maximizes the R^2 from 7, 14, 21, 28 or 35 days. See Section A8 of the SIF for robustness checks.

²⁵ The regression tables are in Section A9 of the SIF.

Data availability statement. The data and R scripts required to verify the reproducibility of the results in this article are available at <https://doi.org/10.24433/CO.9245000.v4>

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