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News production and construal level: a comparative analysis of the press coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative

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This research integrates construal level theory with news production strategies by exploring the joint effects of distance and editorial commitment on news narratives. In content analyzing the coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by four newspapers in China and West, we investigate determinants of choice of principled or personalized accounts in storytelling. The findings showed that editorial commitment was low and power reliance high when the site of event was far away, leading to the use of higher construals in Western news texts than in Chinese newspapers. This study contributes to the unexplored relationship between news production and construal level theory.

Keywords: news production; construal level theory; editorial commitment; BRI; content analysis

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promulgated by the Chinese state in 2013 set in motion a massive rhetorical campaign that continues to dominate the official discourse today. The initiative, which is widely seen as a calculated move to extend China's geo-political power, has received international media attention (Ferdinand, 2016). The recurring themes and differential patterns of narrative construction in media coverage have become topical in political communication research. Scholars have been interested in not only the profound political economic implications of BRI (Hillman, 2018) but also, more importantly, how varied interpretations of BRI consolidate persistent discursive newsroom strategies and their potential effects on audiences (Wang & Sparks, 2019).

In the attempt to advance a medium-range theory of media's reality construction, this research conceptually links editorial commitment to the degree of abstraction in news texts and empirically tests the relationship between the two in the context of BRI coverage. The former falls under the broad rubric of news production and the latter construal level theory (CLT).

The main reason that we integrate CLT into our conceptualization of news production is that the unique element of spatiality is an almost exclusive characteristic of BRI news reports. Unlike other cross-national news, BRI-related stories involved nations and communities thousands of miles outside China in all directions. Distance, whether social, psychological, or even hypothetical, occupies a central place in CLT. Our attempt at integration emphasizes the level of textual

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abstraction as a specific distance-relevant news attribute. In so doing, we extend CLT beyond its social psychological habitat to the study of a mass communication phenomenon.

Of specific concern to us are how and why news narratives that are built on the same event usually exhibit variances both within and between particular media outlets and media systems (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Xu, 2013). We ask the following questions: What factors determine whether a story relies on a principled or personalized account? Why are some reports engaging and others on the same event distancing? Under what conditions do journalists in professionally or ideologically competitive media organizations converge or diverge in the ways they write news?

To address these questions, we focus our research on the context of BRI, which is pertinent to the current study for the following reasons: the centrality of distance in news events; disparate editorial commitments by media within and outside China; and diverse levels of text abstraction adopted in news within and outside China. We hypothesize that resource and labor inputs in news production vary according to the geographical, social, and psychological distances of news events from the audience, all of which shape the end product.

Conceptualization: news production and construal level theory (CLT)

Relevance of CLT to news

CLT was originally developed to explain the effects of temporal distance on psychological perception (Nussbaum et al., 2003). The theory posits a positive correlation between proximity (from the near to distant future) and degree of abstractness in the psychological construction of an event (Liberman & Trope, 1998). That is, the farther away in time and space an event occurs, the greater the likelihood that people will think about it in abstract terms (i.e., high construal level) and vice versa.

Although they take on the appearance of being incoherent, incidental, and sometimes idiosyncratic, low-level construals have traits of being engaging, emotionally appealing, and therefore effective in promoting vicarious identification. In journalism studies, the editorial manipulation of news texts has long been taken as received knowledge (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Relevant to CLT, media scholars have found that because low-construal narratives can secure attention they encourage a particular style of reporting (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). In the field of political communication, it is common knowledge that journalists are obsessed with including (usually unwarranted) causal statements in stories (Valkenburg et al., 1999), which is prompted by the presumed news value of negativity (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) and their sense of incumbent duty to define social problems (Tichenor et al., 1970). Previous studies showed that causal statements in local news are often low construal, whereas the opposite was found in non-local news (Bishara, 2006; Mullen & Hu, 1989).

Effects aside, the existence of an innate hierarchy of abstractness in symbolic and linguistic representations of reality invariably motivates rhetorical manipulation. For journalists, variances in the construal levels of news texts are but one of the many tactics through which persuasion is designed and materialized in exchange for eyeballs, loyalty, and internalized beliefs. For news writers, it is

usually a matter of time before switching between construal levels becomes second nature, making the adoption of any particular linguistic device in narrative construction effortless and automatic (Becker & Vlad, 2009; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This is particularly true in the coverage of political and international stories, where ideologies strongly influence media workers' perceptions of the world which in turn shape their coverage of it (Hall, 1973).

News production and construal level

Although both news production theories and CLT acknowledge the importance of symbolic representation, the two are conceptually distinct: news production, at least on the surface, denotes the *process* of reality construction, whereas construal levels are typically identified in the *product* of this construction. A meta-analysis of two decades of construal level studies (Soderberg et al., 2015) established the direct effects of psychological distance on abstract thinking. For instance, a news report written mainly based on abstract, normative principles (e.g., territorial sovereignty, bilateral relations, etc.) was found to convey the sense that the target of communication was spatially and temporally distant (Stephan et al., 2010).

News reports that highlight social and psychological distance (e.g., another country, Western culture, etc.) are bound to use abstract expressions. This kind of abstraction–distance matching, termed *construal level congruency*, has been found effective in enhancing persuasive effects (Lee, 2018). There is, however, a twist in the use of high construal in news. It is not completely uncommon that, when they are cited in the media, people in positions of power use vague and encrypted language to deliberately promote an abstract set of goals, values, principles, and ideals (Martin, 2013; Schaffner, 1996).

Distance, whether geographic or psychological, has a prominent place in the timeless list of news values. However, in its most literal form, distance in news simply means that the farther away an event occurs, the less journalists and (in their perception) audiences care about it or bother to devote serious editorial or cognitive resources to it. In contrast, when the event is close to home, the story demands higher mental processing (Guo, 2011).

When geographic and psychological distance counts in a news story, which is most of the time (Guo, 2011), people and events that are distant and dissimilar are routinely portrayed in less humanized conditions than those of their counterparts in greater proximity (Sun, 2009). It is well-documented in the literature that the pairing of distance and high construal in news could significantly mitigate the effects of an event on the audience (Baudrillard, 1995; Robinson, 2005).

Editorial commitment and construal level

Editorial commitment is indicated by the amount of material and number of symbolic resources a given newsroom is willing to devote to the coverage of a news event. It is a dynamic process involving changes in the news sense of individual journalists, the media that employ them, and the institutional ideology in which they are situated (Anderson, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). If a narrow definition of news production focuses on the production of content, then a broader one would involve the variety of maneuvers that reporters and editors engage in to

manipulate the technical and structural aspects of news. These include, but are not limited to, story placement, choice of fonts, length, illustrations, frequency, layout, and so forth. The mundane work in the newsroom intervenes in the news production process by privileging media's views and personalities through prominence, follow-ups, editorials, and op-eds (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). The work requires a minimal commitment of resources to deliver the news with ease (Faupel et al., 1991; Kaniss, 1991; Ryfe, 2012; Turow, 1997). A recent study comparing *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in their coverage of "hot button" issues found striking similarities between the two, not only in their source selection and issue stands but also in the frequency with which the stories appeared and were made prominent, which in effect limited the diversity of views on these issues (Day & Golan, 2005).

Power reliance and construal level

Journalists throughout the world gravitate to power as sources of acquisition, disclosure, and interpretations of events (Brighton & Foy, 2007). Media's dependence on power affects the tones and angles of news, which shape public decisions and the democratic process (Gitlin, 1980). Official sources are not only considered congenitally credible but also are free of charge and easily accessible (Fishman, 1980; Ryfe, 2012). The power-cum-news source combination has given government a strong competitive edge in the battle for publicity among various vested interests. At the opposite extreme of the power continuum are ordinary people whose presence both as sources and targets of news pales in comparison with political elites (Hopmann & Shehata, 2011).

Research context: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The initiative

Initiated and formalized by China's president Xi Jinping in 2013,¹ BRI is widely considered an ambitious geo-economic move to facilitate China's role in global diplomacy. Unlike the original Silk Road mapped by von Richthofen in 1877 that extends from China to Central Asia and then across Eurasia (Sidaway & Woon, 2017), the new initiative branches into two paths: the original land-based Silk Road and the new "Maritime Silk Road" running from China to the Indian Ocean. While it has been celebrated in the Chinese media as part of the larger scheme in the "rise of China" in the international political, economic, and cultural arenas (People's Daily, 2016), the initiative has been viewed with much skepticism and criticism outside China, including the media coverage in nations that are beneficiaries of the initiative (Hillman, 2018). The controversy, or discrepancy, in media reports is mainly derived from readings of the initiative as either an earnest attempt to boost domestic economies through generous diplomatic gestures or an imminent threat to democracy through the expansion of global influence and the solicitation of ideological alliances (Ferdinand, 2016; Winter, 2019).

Overall, the scholarly work on BRI in the West shares an unsettling concern about the Chinese government's use of the initiative to build a Chinacentric sphere (Ferdinand, 2016), which, for most people, is synonymous with "colonial cultural politics" (Sidaway & Woon, 2017, p. 8). In this sphere, China is the center, and

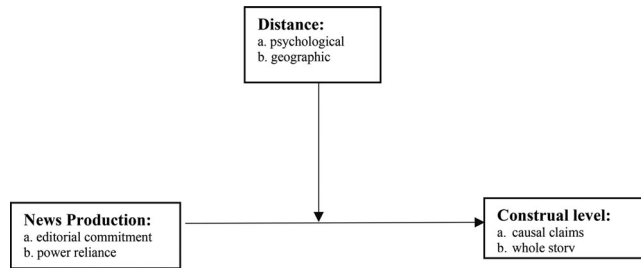


Figure 1. Theoretical model connecting news production and CLT.

the participant countries are assigned the homogenous role of “us” (near), and non-BRI countries are “the other” (far).

The research project: model and hypotheses

Based on our review of previous studies in the literature, we propose the following theoretical model (Figure 1).

Many testable hypotheses are embedded or implied in this general graphic model. For the purpose of this study, we are particularly interested in the following relationships, each of which concerns a specific aspect of the news production-CLT linkage.

H1. Newspapers’ editorial resources are more likely to be favorably committed to BRI stories that take place close to the home country than those that occur far away.

H1a. Stories that take place close to home and receive greater editorial attention are more likely to be low construal than those considered unworthy of serious editorial attention.

H1b. The coverage of BRI stories in the Western press is more likely to be high construal than low construal.

H1 and its sub-hypotheses theoretically bridge three elements in the research model. The predictive structure of the hypotheses specifies an inverse relationship between geographical distance and editorial commitment and, by extension, a negative relationship between editorial commitment and construal level.

We argue that newspapers in general tend to pay more attention structurally (e.g., placement, frequency of coverage, etc.) and substantively (e.g., wording, narrative style, etc.) in their coverage of geographically proximal events than distant events. Moreover, in most news reports, geographically distant events are portrayed to convey their psychological distance (Guo, 2011).

As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) claimed, news workers respond to a hierarchy of influences that motivate them to construct the news in certain ways. Power reliance, as sociological empirical studies of newsrooms have shown, is a ubiquitous value adopted by news workers to save costs, meet deadlines, prevent possible libel issues, and claim professional jurisdiction (Fishman, 1980; Wang & Sparks, 2019; Tuchman, 1978). The value of power reliance is closely related to distance. News

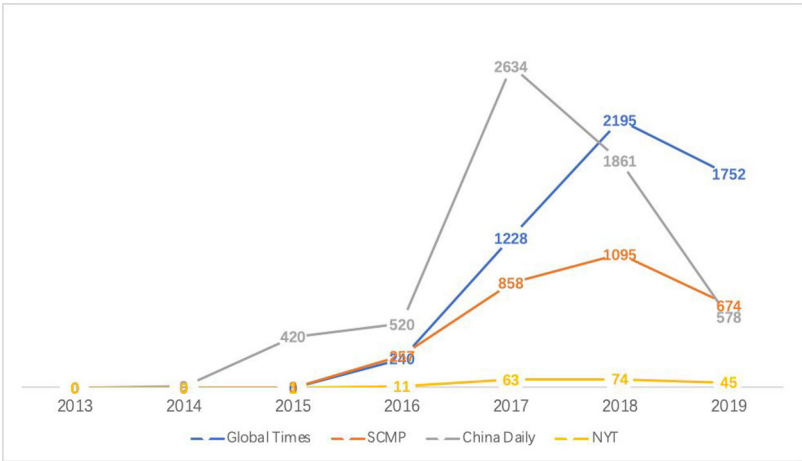


Figure 2. Coverage trend by the four newspapers (2013–2019).

workers rely on power in their coverage of international news for economic reasons (Saleem, 2007; Guo, 2011).

H2. Newspapers are more likely to rely on power sources when the site of the reported BRI event is farther away from the home country.

H2a. The coverage of distant events relying on power sources is prone to the adoption of higher construal levels.

H2b. Western newspaper stories that rely on power sources in reporting BRI events are more likely to adopt higher construal levels than Chinese newspapers are.

Like H1, relationships in the four H2 sub-hypotheses involve the testing of moderation effects. The path of influence flows from the combined force of geographical locations of events and power reliance to the construal levels of news texts.

Methods

Content analysis sampling

To test the hypotheses, we conducted content analyses of the digital editions of four newspapers in mainland China (*China Daily* and *Global Times*), Hong Kong (*South China Morning Post*), and the US (*New York Times*) from 1 January to 31 December 2018. We had two considerations in choosing 2018 as the coding year. First, five years after in the project was begun, BRI had entered maturity, and it was generally accepted in the international community as a new normality in China's global politics. By then, worldwide news and views on BRI had solidified into clear and enduring stances. Second, using the data mining tool, DiVoMiner software, we were able to obtain a trend in the news coverage of the four newspapers from the BRI inception in 2013 to 2019 (Figure 2). It showed that 2018 was a peak year in terms of the number of stories in three of the newspapers except the *China Daily*.

These newspapers, the *Global Times* and *China Daily* in mainland China, *SCMP* in Hong Kong, and *The New York Times* (*NYT*) in the United States are all published in English. In the case of BRI coverage, *NYT* was assumed to be prototypical of the Western standpoint although the same cannot be said indisputably about its representational role in other issues and other Western media. Even though it projects a liberal and independent editorial stance, *NYT* is regarded as leaning closer to the Democratic party rather than to the Republican party (Puglisi, 2011). That said, the newspaper's inclinations toward domestic politics do not seem to affect its international news coverage, especially stories on BRI-related events. The two mainland Chinese newspapers are officially granted a modicum of flexibility in news coverage because they mainly target English-speaking audiences, which is more than their Chinese language counterparts can aspire to. The Hong Kong-based *SCMP* claims to be ideologically impartial and editorially professional, but because its new owner is a mainland Chinese business tycoon, to a discerning eye, the newspaper's standpoint clearly leans toward Beijing (Vines, 2018). *SCMP* and the two mainland Chinese-financed newspapers are not unique in terms of their editorial commitment to BRI news, which could conceivably be matched by newspapers in other Asian societies. However, the project's investigators and coders are much more familiar with them, which enables a nuanced and subtle reading of the news texts.

As a society of immigrants from mainland China and emigrants to the West, Hong Kong has had an uneasy relationship with both mainland and the West. Its political and institutional order is mandated by Beijing, whereas its economic and financial operations follow the Western logic of the free market (Cheng, 2016). Such intricacies in the ideological spectrum have given birth to a media ecology in the territory akin to what Hallin and Mancini (2004) described as political parallelism, which situates *SCMP* in a unique position between right- and left-wing predispositions, which is not the case with the other three newspapers examined in this study. In terms of reach, all four selected newspapers boast massive online circulations and high agenda-setting influence in their respective audiences.

DiVoMiner software was used to sample the news articles. We used the phrases "One Belt, One Road," "Belt and Road," and "Belt and Road initiative" as keywords to generate the data pool. After cleaning both irrelevant and duplicated data, 5,226 news articles were generated. Among these articles, 1,861 were from the *China Daily*, 2,195 from the *Global Times*, 1,095 from *SCMP*, and 74 from *NYT*.

Measurement and coding

Articles were coded for news production strategies, distance, and construal level in line with the proposed research model and hypotheses. Each of the three focal concepts subsumed two dimensions that contained multiple indicators. Eight graduate students who majored in communication were selected as human coders, and they received multiple training sessions.

Distance

Distance was decomposed into two dimensions. The *geographical distance* dimension was coded by story site that separated "within China" (1) and "outside

China” (0). In cases where both China and other countries were mentioned in the story, the coders were asked to determine the primary locus of the event. Used in conjunction with geographical distance, *psychological distance* was measured by the single criterion of whether the country reported was described as China’s friend (1) or not (0).

News production strategies

The news production concept also subsumed two dimensions: The *editorial commitment* dimension was indexed as follows: 1) prominence (measured by length of story); 2) frequency (measured by number of times BRI-related stories appeared in the same issue); 3) illustration (indicated by the number of photos and illustrations accompanying the story); 4) direct quotes (net number of statements wrapped in quotation marks and cited in the story).

DiVoMinor was used to count these measures automatically when they were manifest, and the human coders counted the number of direct quotes in the news content and transferred them into numerical scales. Story length was recoded in two steps: in step one, all values larger than 1,997 (accounting for 3.5% of the coded items) were replaced by the mean of 674; in step two, length was dummy coded into two categories according to Masini et al. (2018) standard (very short = 0 to 200 words; short = 201 to 400 words; medium = 401 to 600 words; long = more than 601 words). Short and medium lengths were assigned the value of 0 and the rest 1. We also dummy coded frequency into two values: 0 = number of stories appearing on the same issue at or below 9 and 1 = all other values. The direct quotes were coded the same (0 = 3 or less; 1 = all other values). The cutoff point was the medium of the cumulative percent of each variable.

The scale of *power reliance* was measured by the direct news sources that a story included. We coded four types of common sources in the journalist–source relationship literature (Cottle, 2007; Ferrucci, 2018; Schudson, 2010; Tuchman, 1978): ordinary people (low end of power reliance scale); business elite (middle); intellectual/expert (high middle); government officials (high end of the scale). All types were binary coded into yes and no (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

Construal level

Guided by previous studies (Nan, 2007; Nussbaum et al., 2003), we measured the two dimensions of construal level as follows: the overall abstractness of the *whole story* indexed on a five-point scale from “very concrete” (1) to “very abstract” (5); and the abstractness of *causal claims* within a story (1 = concrete; 2 = somewhat abstract; 3 = very abstract).

Intercoder reliability

Prior to the formal coding procedure, we used DiVoMiner to randomly generate 20 pieces of news from the data pool for reliability checking. The eight coders read and coded the articles. The project investigators then discussed with the coders the problem of disagreement in the coding results and helped them reach a consensus on the meanings of the coding items. The investigators also arbitrated

when disagreements were unresolved. Then DiVoMiner was randomly assigned 100 pieces of news from the sample pool by each coder independently. To balance the number of articles from the *NYT*, we manually added all non-selected articles from the source to the formal coding list. In total, 864 pieces of news articles were coded, accounting for 16.5% of the sample pool. Cohen's kappa was used to calculate the intercoder reliability of the latent variables. The composite reliability for all latent variables was above .90.

Results

We first discuss the general distribution of the key variables in the research model. In all four newspapers, reports of BRI events that were geographically and psychologically proximal to China outweighed those that were relatively distant (mean = 0.6, s.d. = 0.5 for social; mean = 1.0, s.d. = 0.9 for psychological) although the large standard deviations indicated considerable variations in the two distance measures.

Editorial commitment subsumed a set of four measures. Most BRI stories were of medium length (*prominence*: mean = 674 words) but long enough for deliberation and diversity as news stories written in English (Masini et al., 2018). The appearance of multiple stories in the same issue was not as high as expected (*frequency*: mean = 9.8 on a scale from 1 to 26). The *illustrations* and *direct quotes* measures showed the same results.

On the scale of power reliance, quotes from government officials as major news sources ranked the highest (mean = 0.7), which was expected because of the prioritized political nature of the initiative. This was followed by intellectuals (mean = 0.4), which showed the press's need for opinions by experts and pundits to legitimize or criticize the initiative and to offer interpretive structures to the audience (Willnat et al., 2019). Quotes from business spokespersons were few, and the fewest were direct quotes from ordinary people.

The two measures of construal level showed different distributions. The mean of *abstractness of causal statement* was closer to 1 than 3 on the scale. In general, causal claims comprised the bulk of news stories, often without solid ground. In the case of BRI coverage, the stories tended to favor concrete rather than abstract reporting in their causal statements. In contrast, when the entire story was considered, the reporting relied mainly on abstract principles.

Editorial commitment and construal level (H1)

Table 1 presents the results of the chi-square test of H1, which predicts that, in general, newspapers tend to pay greater editorial attention to news events in proximal rather than distant parts of the world. Editorial commitment was divided into story length, frequency of BRI stories appearing in the same issue, illustration, and direct quotes. Distance was a dummy variable with the values of "within China" (proximal) and "outside China" (distant).

The chi-square values of all the tested relationships were significant: the weakest were the presence of direct quotes ($\chi^2 = 31.99$), and the strongest was the presence of illustrations ($\chi^2 = 255.23$). Story length was a surrogate for prominence. Because the news articles were e-versions, we could not determine their actual

Table 1. Chi-square test of the relationship between distance, dimensions of editorial commitment across the four newspapers (H1: N = 864).

	Primary Site of the BRI event (%)									
	Within China					Outside China				
	<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	Total	<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	Total
Story length										
Long	38%	60%	35%	35%	92%	26%	71%	39%	92%	48%
Short	62%	40%	65%	65%	8%	74%	29%	61%	8%	52%
$\chi^2 = 61.26; p < .001$										
Frequency										
≥ 9 stories	58%	6%	59%	0%	41%	68%	5%	66%	0%	52%
≤ 8 stories	42%	94%	41%	100%	59%	32%	95%	34%	100%	48%
$\chi^2 = 143.97; p < .001$										
Illustration										
Yes	60%	2%	7%	2%	31%	69%	7%	5%	11%	31%
No	30%	98%	93%	98%	69%	31%	93%	95%	89%	69%
$\chi^2 = 255.23; p < .001$										
Direct quotes										
Yes	38%	59%	43%	77%	48%	31%	54%	31%	77%	38%
No	62%	41%	57%	23%	52%	69%	46%	69%	23%	62%
$\chi^2 = 31.99; p < .001$										

Note: Figures in the table are rounded to the nearest unit. Raw numbers of newspaper issues are omitted for the sake of simplicity. The same applies to Table 5.

placement in the hardcopy. The long–short cutoff line was 600 words, which roughly filled a single-spaced A4 page in 12 pt. font. A story of that size is not long by any traditional standard, but long-form journalism has given way to “fast-food” news coverage (Molyneux, 2018).

Of the four newspapers, the Hong Kong-based *SCMP* was the only one that demonstrated a preference (60%) for long-form journalism. The other three devoted similar amounts of space, about one-third, to the same subject. However, in reporting events outside China, *NYT* and *SCMP* were 71%, and nearly all reports (92%) were long.

Regarding multiple BRI stories in the same issue, both mainland newspapers consistently (as frequently as 60%) committed their space to nine (mean = 9 stories) or more stories in the same issue on BRI events within China and slightly more on those occurring outside China. Conversely, the figure was close to zero in *SCMP* and zero in *NYT* for stories both within and outside China. The highest number of stories appearing in the same issue of *NYT* was three.

Compared with the *Global Times*, which tended to use illustrations with its stories (60%), the other three tended not to use illustrations in their coverage of BRI stories within and outside China. Regarding the use of direct quotes in stories, *NYT* outperformed the other three (77%), lagging *SCMP* (59%) by a considerable margin, followed by the *China Daily* (43%) and *Global Times* (38%). This pattern remained similar in the coverage of BRI stories.

Table 2. OLS regression analysis: Predicting construal levels in causal statements and in whole news story by editorial commitment moderated by psychological and geographic distance (H1a: N = 864).

Predictors	Construal level in causal statements (high)	Construal level of whole news story (high)
Control variables (<i>Distance</i>)		
Psychological: Nation as China's friend	-.18***	-.01
Geographic: Primary site of event (far)	.05	.12**
R² (%)	2.90***	1.40**
Independent variables (<i>Editorial commitment</i>)		
Story length	.30***	-.08*
Frequency of BRI stories on same issue	.07	-.09*
Illustration/photos	-.09*	-.12**
Number of direct quotes	.12*	-.12**
Incremental R² (%)	2.30***	2.20***
Interaction terms (<i>Distance × commitment</i>)		
Psychological × story length	-.22***	-.17***
Psychological × frequency	-.15*	-.13**
Psychological × illustration	-.06	-.20***
Psychological × number of direct quotes	-.15**	-.17***
Geographic × story length	-.18***	-.16***
Geographic × frequency	-.11*	.15***
Geographic × illustration	-.04	-.19***
Geographic × number of direct quotes	-.21***	-.19***
Incremental R² (%)	3.20***	2.10**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Joint effects of distance and editorial commitment on construal levels (H1a)

Table 2 shows the results of testing hypotheses H1a, which predicts the joint influence of editorial commitment and distance on construal levels in news texts. The psychological and geographical distance variables showed opposite patterns of prediction on the two construal-level dependent variables: causal claims within the story and the entire news story. Warmness in feeling toward a friendly country reduced the construal levels in causal statements and was unrelated to the construal level of the entire story. The reverse was found for geographical distance.

Two dimensions of editorial commitment (i.e., length and direct quotes) were significantly positively related to the construal levels of causal statements. The presence of illustrations gave the story a more or less human touch, and the causal statement was at the lower end of the construal level. All four dimensions were negatively related to the construal level of the entire story, which suggested that the allocation of news resources tended to favor concrete and specific coverage of BRI events in all four newspapers.

All but one (2 distance measures \times 4 news production indicators) of the eight interaction terms were inversely associated with both construal level dependent variables. Regarding psychological distance, nations perceived as China's friend were typically described as such in the news text. Combined, heavy editorial input and friendship discourse could motivate journalists to narrate the story from a personal perspective and use concrete facts with the aim of eliciting an affective response in the audience.

The comparison of the two blocks of moderators (psychological vs. geographical \times measures of editorial commitment) indicated that serious editorial attention played a central role in determining whether an BRI news story was written predominately at a low construal level or a high construal level. Of the four dimensions of editorial commitment, illustration showed the weakest power to predict the construal levels of causal statements. Based on the coefficients shown in Table 3, H1a is supported. Independent paths of the effects of editorial commitment and distance on news story construal levels were greatly increased when the two independent variables were combined, thus offering strong evidence for the hypothesized interaction effects.

Construal level in Western vs. Chinese press (H1b)

No meaningful differences were found across the four newspapers in the degree of construal levels adopted in causal statements. The findings indicated that the Western and Chinese press showed no systematically different inclinations to favor concrete or abstract coverage in their causal statements about BRI events. *NYT*, the only Western newspaper in the sample, was more likely to use high construal in causal statements, but not significantly so. This pattern of construal level was replicated in its stories. *SCMP* showed the most low construal-level coverage of BRI stories, followed by *NYT*, the *China Daily*, and the *Global Times*, in that order. The chi-square test results were not significant for construal level of causal statements among the four newspapers, but they were significant for the entire story. Therefore, H1b is partially supported.

Distance and press power reliance (H2)

In this study, evidence for the reliance on press power was mainly obtained by counting the frequency with which political authorities or government officials were cited in the news story in contrast with other social forces and ordinary people. Table 3 presents the results of the differential weights that the four newspapers attached to political authorities in their OBOR coverage when the event was proximal or distant. Regarding direct quotes from government officials cited in news events within China, the four newspapers showed no dramatic differences. The largest gap was between *SCMP* (42%) and *NYT* (65%). The figures increased by almost 20% in all four papers except the *China Daily* (58–66%) when the events occurred outside China, a clear indication that the press tended to cling to the rhetoric of political power in reporting distant news.

In comparison, corporate representatives had little presence in the press space—roughly one-third of that occupied by political actors. However, the coefficients increased with the presence of politicians with intellectuals, experts, and

Table 3. Chi-square test of the relationship between distance, dimensions of press power reliance and the four newspapers (H2: N = 864).

Quotes from	Primary Site of the OBOR event (%)									
	Within China					Outside China				
	<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	<i>Total</i>
Gvt. official										
Yes	64%	42%	58%	65%	58%	84%	68%	66%	85%	76%
No	36%	58%	42%	35%	42%	16%	32%	34%	15%	24%
$\chi^2 = 8.21; p < .05$										
Business elite										
Yes	12%	31%	21%	23%	19%	15%	30%	21%	21%	21%
No	88%	69%	79%	77%	81%	85%	70%	79%	79%	79%
$\chi^2 = 10.35; p < .05$										
Intellectuals										
Yes	32%	48%	30%	65%	36%	29%	38%	27%	58%	34%
No	68%	52%	70%	35%	64%	71%	62%	73%	42%	66%
$\chi^2 = 16.15; p < .05$										
Ordinary people										
Yes	3%	12%	1%	23%	5%	8%	3%	11%	23%	9%
No	97%	88%	99%	77%	95%	92%	97%	89%	77%	91%
$\chi^2 = 28.20; p < .001$										

pundits (30–65%). Ordinary people were directly quoted the least in all newspapers except *NYT*, where the number of quotes by people in the streets equaled that of intellectuals. It was not surprising that the scale of power reliance was in favor of political authorities. However, the newspapers' fondness for expert over corporate opinions was unexpected. The results of the chi-square tests of differences between observed and expected values in H2 were all statistically significant, indicating that the press generally gravitated toward centers and representatives of power, particularly in covering distant news.

Distance, power reliance, and construal level (H2a)

Table 4 shows the combined effects of distance and power reliance on whether journalists reported BRI stories in abstract or concrete ways. Because the zero-order relationship between the two distance variables and the two construal level variables was the same (Table 2), the four dimensions of power reliance demonstrated mixed yet systematic associations with the construal level measures. Only quotes from intellectuals were moderately positively related to construal level in causal statements in the news texts, whereas the other three were absent.

Quotes from all four sources were significantly related to construal levels in the entire news story but in different predictive patterns. High percentages of the power end of the power reliance scale (i.e., government officials as sources) indicated the story was more abstract ($\beta = .16; p < .001$), as were quotes from experts and learned social observers ($\beta = .19; p < .001$). Conversely, quotes from business-people ($\beta = -.21; p < .001$) and members of the public ($\beta = .15; p < .001$) tended to give BRI stories a personal touch with concrete and tangible facts.

Table 4. OLS regression analysis: Predicting construal levels in causal statements and in the whole news story by reliance on power moderated by psychological and geographic distance (H2a: N = 864).

Predictors	Construal level in causal statements (high)	Construal level of whole news story (high)
Control variables (<i>Distance</i>)		
Psychological: Nation as China's friend	.18***	-.01
Geographic: Primary site of event (far)	.05	.12**
R² (%)	2.90***	1.40**
Independent variables (<i>Power reliance</i>)		
Quote from government officials	.01	.16***
Quote from business representatives	.02	-.21***
Quote from intellectuals/expert	.07*	.19***
Quote from ordinary people	-.00	-.15***
Incremental R² (%)	0.60	9.50***
Interaction terms (<i>Distance</i> × <i>power reliance</i>)		
Psychological × official quote	-.10*	.22***
Psychological × business quote	-.01	-.15***
Psychological × expert quote	.02	.16***
Psychological × ordinary people quote	.00	-.14***
Geographic × official quote	.30***	.17***
Geographic × business quote	.10	-.21***
Geographic × expert quote	.13*	.21***
Geographic × ordinary people quote	.09	-.14***
Incremental R² (%)	2.40**	2.20**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The interaction effects of distance and scale of power reliance on construal levels in the news texts were incongruent across the sample. News stories that said a nation was China's friend and cited political authorities were likely to offer concrete rather than abstract facts in causal claims within the story ($\beta = -.10$; $p < .05$). This result makes sense because officials in friendly countries are likely to elicit specific historical or modern-day exemplars of that friendship (e.g., Marco Polo, barter trade, cross-cultural marriages, and success stories of individuals, etc.). With geographical distance serving as the moderator, all four indicators of power frame tended positively to high construal levels in causal statements in the stories, two of which were significant (geographic × official quote and geographic × expert quote). In contrast to construal levels in causal statements, all eight moderator variables made significant contributions to variances in the construal level in the entire news story.

Table 5. Comparison of construal levels in OBOR stories with power reliance among the four newspapers (H2b: N = 864).

Power reliance (%)										
Official news source						Non-official news source				
<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	<i>Total</i>		<i>Global Times</i>	<i>SCMP</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>NYT</i>	<i>Total</i>
Construal level of whole story										
High	59%	30%	47%	35%	48%	39%	23%	33%	50%	33%
Low	41%	70%	53%	65%	52%	61%	77%	67%	50%	67%
$\chi^2 = 32.39; p < .001$										
Construal level of causal claims										
High	29%	27%	35%	29%	31%	35%	19%	24%	69%	29%
Low	71%	73%	65%	71%	69%	65%	81%	76%	31%	71%
$\chi^2 = 2.42$; not significant										

Reliance on political power (i.e., direct quotes from government officials) strongly augmented the overall construal level in news texts across the psychological and geographical distance measures. Not surprisingly, the presence of political actors who typically used an encrypted language characterized by high-sounding principles elevated the construal level of the story. Similarly, expert opinion, a source of power in its own right and with its own jargon, also increased the construal level of the story with more or less equal intensity as political officials across the two blocks of interaction terms. Therefore, H2a is supported.

Power reliance and construal levels in Western vs. Chinese newspapers (H2b)

H2b states that Western press stories that heavily cite political officials have higher construal levels than their Chinese counterparts. Two comparisons are being made here. The first is between construal levels in causal statements and the second is among the four newspapers. The first comparison (Table 5, lower half) showed no significant differences across the four newspapers with or without the dummy-coded official news source. The largest difference was between 27% (*SCMP*) and 35% (*China Daily*). Interestingly, *NYT* was much higher in the construal level of causal claims than the other newspapers when official voices were absent.

In the second comparison, some significant variances were observed in the construal levels in the entire news story. The two mainland newspapers (*Global Times* and *China Daily*) ranked the highest construal level (59% and 47%, respectively). *SCMP* showed the lowest construal level at 30% in the “official news source” category. The variances among the four newspapers in the “non-official news source” category were less impressive. Based on these results, H2b is partially supported.

Discussion and conclusion

News texts as frozen residuals of recorded history are useful foundation upon which scholars develop, compare, and contrast theories. In this study, we focused

on variances within and between press articles to determine the intricate relationships among distance, news production strategies, and construal levels. We tested two sets of hypotheses: one (H1, H1a and H1b) concerned the bearing that event distance and editorial commitment had on the construal levels of news stories; the other (H2, H2a, H2b) concerned whether distance and reliance on power engender systematic effects on news construal levels. All hypotheses except H1b were supported.

Distance, editorial commitment, and construal levels (H1, H1a, and H1b)

It is axiomatic that distance has an estranging effect on both the producers and the recipients of news in the political communication research (e.g., the “distant suffering” literature). Based on well-documented findings, we proposed that news events occurring closer to home would attract greater media interest than those farther away.

Editorial attention favors low construal in causal claims and the entire story, particularly when the site of BRI event is close to instead of far away from China. Consistent with predictions of CLT, a news event that is distant in time and space can be estranging because unfamiliarity tends to reduce a sense of intimacy in the journalists covering the news and its audience. Our findings indicate that distance and linguistic abstraction are routinely paired.

Our findings showed that Western newspapers covered BRI stories in a more abstract way, which supported H1b. One interpretation of this finding is that the coverage of BRI-related news events was bound to be principled because the occurrences were likely at the level of visits of heads of state, corporate deals, and the development of international relations.

Distance, press power reliance, and construal levels (H2, H2a, H2b)

All four newspapers were attracted to power in their coverage of BRI stories. This tendency increased when the events were outside rather than inside China. The four points on the scale of power reliance represented four distinct, but not exhaustive, categories of sources frequently seen in news texts. From the standpoint of mass media in general, political authorities have the privilege of voice because of their status. The *NYT* and *Global Times*, which are located at the two opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, performed identically in this regard; both devoted their most valued space to government officials, whether far or near.

The near absence of opinions of ordinary people in Chinese newspapers may be explained either as an artifact of the lack of journalistic professionalism or an intentional oversight to promote a centralized political agenda. The finding that most of the variables in the model appeared significant at the story level but not at the item level could have three potential explanations: First, the degree of text abstraction (i.e., high or low construal level) was a latent coding that required sophisticated judgment. In that case, the tone of the entire news story, typically set by the headline and the lead, was somewhat easier to settle in the mind than the specific claims in the story. Second, the coding performed by machine (e.g., story length, frequency, presence of illustrations, etc.) was more precise than the human coding because the former dealt with technicality and the latter with

interpretation, which reflects the issue of manifest versus latent reading. Third, by definition, BRI stories carried on both Chinese and Western media involve more than one nation or society, which inevitably entails geographical, cultural, and historical distancing (Winter, 2019). Because distance, rather than sentences, is the foundation of the story, it is likely to boost the significance of the results of the statistical tests conducted compare the whole with the part.

In coding the stories, an impression emerged. Although it was not empirically tested, foreign media (in this case, *NYT*) tended to domesticate news by assigning prominent international events (in this case, BRI) home relevance, which was most likely in consideration of the taste of local audiences (Chan et al., 2002). We believe that this unexpected finding has theoretical implications that could be explored in future research. Our findings also showed that BRI was the subject of multiple streams of narratives (e.g., social, cultural, political, economic, diplomatic, historical, etc.), each of which warrants cross-disciplinary research. However, for political communication scholars, the moral of the story mainly lies in how these factors affect linguistic representations, mass media coverage, interpersonal discussion, and their possible effects on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of those exposed to the news.

By replication and triangulation in independent research in the field of political communication and other disciplines, the convergence of findings could inform media organizations and professionals about the forces that shape news production and its subsequent effects on audiences. Because BRI is an ongoing process, the dynamics and fluidity of the initiative are likely to set new agendas for the press and entail serious policy implications for power players and decision makers. We are optimistic that our conceptual framework, its corresponding operational definition, and the results of our data analysis will inspire further research so that whatever ambiguities remain in the present study will be clarified, and our understanding of the problem at hand will be deepened.

Note

1. The trajectory of institutionalization of BRI by the Chinese government: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n1/2016/0906/c385474-28694919.html>.

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