When press freedom meets national interest: How terrorist attacks are framed in the news in China and the US

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Abstract
This cross-nation, multi-event study examined 142 news stories from CCTV and CNN on two major terrorist attacks in China and the United States. It aimed to unveil how press system and national interest come into play in influencing media coverage of terrorism. Framing analyses were conducted in terms of attitude toward local government and perpetrators, news origin and source, coverage theme, definition of the incident, and attribution of cause of the incident. Findings suggest that, in reporting these two significant terrorist attacks, media of the two countries employed varied framing strategies based on their ideological backgrounds and national interests. The framing strategies utilized by the two media outlets are interpreted and discussed.

Keywords
Boston Bombing, CCTV, Kunming Attack, national interest, press freedom, terrorism, terrorist attack

Introduction
Within 1 year, in April 2013 and March 2014, two major terrorist attacks took place in China and the United States, respectively. These attacks shocked the world and were extensively covered by domestic and international media, which provides an extraordinary context for a cross-nation and multi-event comparative study.

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Terrorism has become an international phenomenon in recent years as terrorists operate in many different countries, be they authoritarian or liberal, Eastern or Western. The United States and China, as two of the world’s most militarily powerful and politically influential countries, face terrorism challenges and problems. The 9/11 attacks were regarded as one of the most violent and shocking terrorism attacks that have taken place in the United States, and since then, the US government has continuously fought against terrorism. China has been facing the challenge of domestic separatist groups from Xinjiang and Tibet for decades.

Although facing the same terrorism challenges, these two nations happen to have distinctive media systems which are in stark ideological contrast. While the US media enjoy a libertarian tradition and circumstances, their counterparts in China are serving in a Communist media system and under strict ideology controls. In reporting these two terrorist attacks, news media of the two countries were caught in the intersection of national interests and ideologies, and thus seem to have constructed the coverage within certain boundaries, resulting in differences in many aspects. Within the global media landscape, media outlets in the United States and China are seen as different functional machines in reporting terrorism events and issues, domestic or foreign. Although the two countries are strongly opposed to the idea of terrorism, their media seem to have reported the two terrorist attacks in different ways.

Along with the growing threats that terrorism posts worldwide, media scholars have been increasingly concerned with portrayals of terrorism in the news. Although comparative research has been done to illustrate how terrorism and terrorist attacks are framed in different media outlets (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2008; Shoemaker, Han, Wang, & Wang, 2006), the majority of those studies are limited in that they tend to examine a single dimension: for example, comparing media coverage of the same event in different countries. These past studies, either country-wise or event-wise, have ignored a two-dimensional reality. That is, national interest and ideology control are highly relevant with regard to terrorism coverage. When national interests meet ideology control, the interaction between the two may play a crucial role in determining media portrayals.

This study is a modest first attempt at exploring the effects of national interests and press system on terrorism news reporting. In this study, the two countries’ national television channels, CCTV and CNN, are compared in their portrayals of the two major terrorist attacks in their home countries: the Kunming Railway Station Attack in China and the Boston Bombing in the United States. These two significant incidents, by nature, all fit into the definition of “terrorist action”: the premeditated use of physical force by non-state actors against soft targets such as civilians with the intention of influencing the elites and the public in a spectacular way (Townshend, 2011; Tuman, 2003). Although possibly involving different motivations or tactics, they can be considered largely homogeneous in terms of such a definition and could have been reported similarly while, in fact, they were not. As such, this study conducts a framing analysis into the media coverage in terms of attitude toward local government and perpetrators, news origin and source, coverage theme, definition of the incident, and attribution of cause of the incident. The frames employed in the news stories are interpreted and discussed in the context of press system differences and national interests.

**Literature review**

*Terrorism in the news*

As McQuail (1992) pointed out, differences in news coverage are to be expected because no news-gathering and reporting is fundamentally nonideological, apolitical, or nonpartisan. Terrorism, as a
concept inherently dependent upon communication and the relaying of a message, according to Silke (2003), is the term used to describe a violent act that is inherently against human nature. Previous studies of media reporting terrorism examine several aspects, such as the media portrayals of terrorism incidents or terrorists, how the media label terrorist actions and actors (e.g. Lule, 2002; Weimann & Winn, 1994), as well as the reporting formats and story types (e.g. Altheide, 1987; Atwater, 1987). Some others focus on specific terrorism attack incidents and terrorism groups (Li & Izard, 2003). Norris, Kern, and Just (2003) observe that a worldwide normative assessment has been established with regard to terrorism: Attacks are denounced by political elites almost everywhere. Berkowitz and Eko (2007), however, conclude that in reporting conflict, news media tend not only to relay events but also represent core values of the culture in which they are produced, which will lead to varied reporting styles and focuses. Chatterji (2001) has also demonstrated that news coverage of foreign terrorism is said to depend on the politics of terrorists and the politics of the country whose media is doing the coverage.

**News framing**

The term “framing” may be traced back to Goffman’s (1974) work, in which frames were defined as embodiments of the principles of organization which govern (social) events, and the term was used to refer to a specific set of expectations that are used to make sense of social situations. Framing was then applied to the news process by Tuchman (1978), who noted that frames turn “non-recognizable happenings or amorphous talk” into a discernible event. Framing, as a research stream, came into maturation in the 1990s, as highlighted by Entman’s works on framing (Entman, 1991, 1993; Entman & Rojecki, 1993) and Scheufele’s (1999) clarification of the process model of framing. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient, or prominent, while Watson and Hill (2000) see framing as a process by which the media place reality “into frame.” Severin and Tankard (2001) define framing as “an idea arrangement for news contents that provide context and suggestion of what issues need to be given extra attention through selection, pressure, no involvement and elaboration.” In news coverage of terrorism, a number of common frames have been identified in previous studies, including general news perspectives, attribution of responsibility, protestor behavior, and government action (Du & Cheng, 2013; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). When it comes to specific news coverage analyses, several key elements have been studied separately, for example, the news source. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) define news source as “external suppliers of raw materials, whether speeches, interviews, corporate reports, or government hearings” (p. 105). They conclude that the source of news information and the reliance of reference materials together cause journalists to report with a certain ideology and stance; moreover, news sources can also affect news content and the ways in which a journalist makes news decisions by evaluating an issue or event (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Other elements, such as news origin, reporting prominence, and news stance, have also been noted in studies concerning news framing of terrorism among different countries (e.g. Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2008).

**Press systems, ideologies, and national interests**

China and the United States have contrasting press systems (Hachten & Scotton, 2007): Chinese media, within a Communist press system, are regarded as the mouthpiece of the Chinese government, while US media enjoy a libertarian press system with little ideological controls.
News media does more than simply serve as a vehicle to disseminate facts; it is also a source through which ideology is conveyed. Previous research has found that news media usually construct reality in a manner that is congruent with their underlying ideological and political functions (Akhavan & Ramaprasad, 1998). With regard to the role ideology plays in news production and dissemination, Van Dijk (1998) argues that ideologies are invented and reproduced by the society, relying on discourse. He holds that the production of news, among many other media genres, may thus be examined in detail for the ways in which actions, discourses, sounds, and images are organized to the extent that ideological production and reproduction, including processes among the audience, are most effective. He further contends that news production reflects what has been said about institutional production routines and constraints. As such, preferential access is reflected in preferential quoting, favorable opinions, preferred topics, and generally in all aspects of media discourse.

Comparison studies between the United States and China’s media have revealed ideology’s influence on the press, even though the United States is regarded as the libertarian press system with supposedly more objectivity. Lee and Craig (1992) argue that US newspapers also have certain ideological patterns, which create a distinction between “us” and “them.” For terrorism coverage, “them” often refers to followers of the Muslim faith, which is often seen as the perpetrators of the world’s largest terrorism incidents. For China, the effect of ideology is more obvious, as in this communist country, media must adhere to the government ideology. Chinese media never work in a political, economic, and ideological vacuum (McQuail, 1992); instead, they usually work to support the needs of authorities to establish control (Lu, 1999).

Scholars have attempted to identify the consistency of relationships between national interests and news framing. Just as Paletz and Entman (1981) argue, international reporting in the United States is consistent with the government’s foreign policy that represents the American interest. Lee and Yang (1995) suggested that national interest plays a crucial role in defining media accounts of the political world, thus leading to the result that media are tied closely to national interest and elite politics in arenas of foreign policy. They exemplify this opinion by pointing out that US media tend to domesticate foreign news as variations of American themes; in reports by US media, values closely tied to American interests are frequently found, and that even though US media do criticize US policies when reporting international news stories, this is mostly at the technical level at which the policies are carried out rather than questioning the basic assumptions “that rationalize US policy as honorable and its opponents’ policy as dishonorable.” Handley’s (2008) research echoed with Lee and Yang’s conclusion in stating that journalists usually prefer national frames over professional frames when their fellow citizens are victims of political violence.

It is worth noting that although much research has been done to illustrate how terrorism and terrorist attacks are framed in different media outlets (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2008; Shoemaker et al., 2006), most of these studies are limited in that they tend to examine on one single dimension: for example, comparing media coverage of the same event in different countries. These previous studies, either country-wise or event-wise, have ignored a two-dimensional reality. That is, when national interests meet press system, which are both highly relevant with regard to terrorism coverage, the interplay between the two may be crucial in determining the media portrayals.

**Terrorist attacks in China and the United States**

To objectively compare the framing from the two countries, one terrorism event from each country was selected and its coverage by two mainstream news outlets in each country compared. For China, the selected event was the 2014 Kunming Railway Station Attack, in which perpetrators
linked with the Xinjiang separatist movement attacked civilians with machetes and knives, killing 29 and injuring more than 130 people; In the United States, the incident was the bombing at the 2013 Boston Marathon conducted by two US residents, which killed three and injured 183 others.

Based on previous research, this study formulated two general research questions:

**RQ1.** How were the Boston Marathon Bombing and Kunming Railway Station Attack reported in the news coverage in CCTV and CNN, respectively?

**RQ2.** What are the differences, if any, among them?

### Method

#### Data source and sampling

A three-stage sampling process was carried out to collect the data. We first collected raw samples of two terrorist events covered by the two countries’ leading English-language news outlets, namely CCTV and CNN. Considered an “archetypical” media outlet in China, CCTV, the only national channel, has been chosen as a representative media outlet in much previous research on Chinese media for its predominant position in the media system. According to Zhu (2012), about two-thirds of all television hours in China are spent watching CCTV shows. CCTV’s flagship news program, News Simulcast, is shown simultaneously by most provincial and lower channels in China, making it one of the most watched television programs nationwide (Feng, 2013). In comparative analysis of media content between or among different countries, CCTV often represents Chinese television in previous studies (Billings, Angelini, & Wu, 2011; Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1998; Paek, Nelson, & Vilela, 2011). On the other hand, CNN is frequently selected to represent US media in previous research (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016; Jang, 2006; Jürgen & Schäfer, 2014; Kim, 2014; Miladi, 2006) due to its significant role in global agenda-setting.

For CCTV, we used Google to search at its home site of cctvnews.cntv.cn for the key words “Kunming Attack” and “Boston Bombings.” Results were ordered by “relevance,” with every related story included in the raw materials database. For CNN, we also used Google to search at its home site of cnn.com and selected related articles with the same key words; all related articles shown in the search results were collected. Over 100 raw sample articles were included at this stage.

In the second step, expansion of the samples was conducted. By clicking “Related articles” at the bottom (or equivalent) of each article collected in the first step, more related articles were found and sub-sites of each media outlet’s site viewed. Most related stories at CCTV went to its sub-site english.cntv.cn, while for CNN, sub-sites such as edition.cnn, money.cnn, and blog.cnn were included.

In the third step, screening of irrelevant articles was conducted, and this work lasted until the end of the coding process. By going over the raw materials and expanded articles sourced in prior stages, stories with themes not usable for our research were filtered out and deleted. After filtering out all the nonrelevant articles, the finalized sample consisted of 142 news stories:

| Media outlet | Boston (15 April–15 May, 2013) | Kunming (1 March–1 April, 2014) |
|--------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| CCTV         | 22                            | 32                              |
| CNN          | 83                            | 5                               |
Coding and inter-coder reliability

The unit of analysis was one single news story. The coding sheet consisted of key measures of the news story for attitude toward local government and perpetrators, news origin and source, coverage theme, definition of the incident, and cause of the incident. These are either scale (five-point) or categorical variables. A training process for the two coders, who were graduate students, was conducted before the formal coding process was set out. Coding rules and coding sheet criteria were discussed and agreed upon between the principal investigator and the two coders. Before coding the entire 142 stories, the coders randomly selected 10% of the samples using SPSS, coding 15 articles separately and testing the inter-coder reliability. The overall reliability coefficient result using Scott’s Pi passed the benchmark of .75 with the highest being 1 and the lowest .798.

Data analysis

Data obtained through the coding process were entered in SPSS for statistical analysis. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used to analyze the scale variables. Originally, chi-square tests were intended for analyzing the categorical variables in the research design, but in the end, frequency analysis was conducted instead as some of the cells turned out to have an expected value of below 5 (chi-square analysis requires a minimum expected value of greater than 5).

Results

For the scale variables (news prominence determined by time coverage and word count, government reaction, and perpetrator behavior, including sympathy for perpetrators), a series of two-way ANOVA tests were conducted to discover the effect of the independent variables—media origin and event, and the interaction between the two.

Table 1 shows the results of the ANOVA tests. For the coverage duration variable, no significant effect was found regardless of the media origin, event, or interaction. Media origin was found to have a main effect ($F=18.39, p<.01$) as well as event ($F=6.41, p<.05$) on word count, along with an interaction (origin vs event) effect ($F=7.57, p<.01$), which means that overall, word counts of the stories vary between the media outlets, but the media outlet also depend on the individual incidents to decide the news prominence. As for government reaction, no significant effect was found. For the two perpetrator behavior variables (sympathetic attitude and behavior description), event was found to have a significant main effect ($p<.01$).

With regards to sympathy for perpetrator, CCTV shows significant difference when reporting the Kunming Attack ($M=4.09$) and Boston Bombings ($M=3.14, p<.01$). This shows a more obvious condemnatory attitude toward the perpetrators in the Kunming Attack, and a more neutral attitude toward the perpetrators in the Boston Bombings, which reflects the national media outlet’s stance of showing consistency with the Chinese government.

A similar pattern can be seen when it comes to the perpetrator behavior frame. CCTV shows significant differences between reporting the Kunming Attack ($M=1.88$) and the Boston Bombing ($M=2.73, p<.001$), which indicates that CCTV’s news stories frame the perpetrator behavior as violent and merciless for the Kunming Attack, and more neutrally in the case of the Boston Bombing. CCTV, as China’s national news media, holds a stance consistent with the government’s attitude. Therefore, it adopts a quite condemnatory attitude in portraying the perpetrators as violent.
and negative, while for incidents that took place in the United States, it remains more neutral and cautious by avoiding a strongly condemnatory attitude or portraying the perpetrators as violent.

From analyzing the two media outlets’ reporting of the two incidents, we found that for the scale variables’ indexes, CNN shows an incident-framing strategy quite different from its stance. For example, it puts more energy and space into reporting the Boston Bombing than CCTV, and shows a stronger attitude toward the local government’s reaction. This also reveals the stance CNN holds when reporting local terrorism attacks—it pays more attention to the United States’s security. CCTV, however, acts more neutrally in reporting the incidents.

Frequency analyses were conducted to examine the categorical variables, including news origin, quotation source, news theme, incident nature, and cause of incident. Significant differences were found for all these variables, indicating that the reporting styles of CCTV and CNN on the Kunming Attack and Boston Bombing have varied tendencies.

Table 2 presents the news origin result. From the data, we can see that only CCTV obtained news from wire services or news agencies, mostly from China’s national news agency Xinhua News Agency, which is the only official wire service and controls international news flows in China, reflecting CCTV’s political stance and its ideological character. Only CNN obtained news from other professional media outlets when reporting the Boston Bombing (N=2, 2%), but the number is small compared with its use of staff writers/correspondents (N=79, 95%).

Quotation sources were differentiated based on country of origin: victim country source for quotation is from the country where the incident takes place, home country source for quotation is from the media outlet’s country, and third party country for quotation is from a third party country or area.

Table 3 shows the result for the victim country quotation source. As shown, CCTV prefers institutional quotation sources (Kunming-N=11, 34%; Boston-N=11, 50%) including victim country governments and medical agencies. This reflects CCTV’s nature as a government media which favors national and official quotation sources. CNN favored individual sources (victims and their social connections) when reporting the Kunming Attack, which shows its aim to report the incident from more diverse angles rather than relying solely on the local government’s words.

Table 4 shows the difference in the home country quotation source. A similar pattern emerges here as in the victim country quotation source, where we can see that CCTV relies mostly on official quotation sources in reporting the two incidents (Kunming-N=10, 31%; Boston-N=4, 18%), and that CNN relies more on victim sources when reporting the Kunming Attack.
Table 5 presents the differences in the third party country quotation source. It reveals that the two media outlets obtain fewer third party country sources.

Table 6 indicates the differences in the news stories’ most salient themes. The most significant difference for this variable is CCTV’s salient theme when reporting the Kunming Attack. Although like other media reporting the incidents, a large percentage of the stories cover the incident itself and its progress, CCTV spends the same percentage \((N=13, 41\%)\) condemning the terrorists’ behavior and discussing the punishment of the perpetrators. This is likely due to CCTV’s political stance and its ideological control by the central government, which ordains that it must convey the government’s condemnatory attitude toward terrorists to be “politically right” and must cover punishment of the perpetrators as a means of promoting social harmony. In contrast, CCTV shows little condemnation when reporting the Boston Bombing \((N=3, 4\%)\).

Table 7 covers the differences in framing the nature of the incident, and Table 8 covers the terms used to describe the nature of the incidents. A similar pattern can be found in these two charts. For the Kunming Attack, CCTV and CNN have totally opposing stances, with CCTV defining it as a terrorist attack without reservation \((N=28, 88\%)\) and CNN taking a more prudent approach by calling it a terrorist attack with reservation \((N=4, 80\%)\). This comparison indicates CCTV’s distinctive position as a mouthpiece of the Chinese government, reporting the news to convey China’s national interest. In contrast, CNN holds a skeptical attitude toward this incident and largely avoids calling it a terrorist attack directly. In many CNN news stories, coverage demonstrates the perpetrators’ Xinjiang minority ethnicity, suggesting that the nature of this incident may be an ethnic conflict. This also reveals the US government’s interests and ideology. For the Boston Bombing, CCTV and CNN show a more neutral attitude about calling it a terrorist attack.

Table 9 shows the significant differences in media presentations of the causes of the incidents. For the Kunming Attack, CCTV apparently does not regard the cause as religious or ethnic, or related to government policies. Instead, it regards the most important cause, if excluding “not mentioned,” to be politically motivated terrorism \((N=6, 19\%)\). This again appears to show the Chinese government’s ideology and political stance that such violent incidents must be regarded as terrorism. While CNN regards the most important reason for the Kunming Attack to be territorial and separatist conflicts, in the interest of staying objective, CNN avoids attributing the incident to an unfair ethnic conflict. Instead, the outlet neutrally points out that the incident is conducted by Xinjiang separatist groups. For the Boston Bombing, while CCTV avoids mentioning the reason directly (not mentioned-\(N=21, 96\%\)), CNN has clear stances; it regards the cause of the Boston Bombing as civil conflict based on ethnicity \((N=15, 18\%)\).
Table 3. Differences in victim country quotation source.

| Group          | Institutional: government/agency | Professional media | NGOs (e.g. for human rights) | Religious on groups | Individual: victims, witnesses, and connections | Individual: perpetrators and their connection | Individual: other | Law, orders, and documents | Not mentioned | Total |
|----------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------|
|                | N %                             | N %                | N %                          | N %                 | N %                                          | N %                                         | N %             | N %                         | N %           | N %   |
| CCTV-Kunming   | 11 34                           | 0 0                | 1 3                          | 0 0                 | 5 16                                         | 0 0                                         | 4 13            | 2 6                         | 9 28           | 32    |
| CCTV-Boston    | 11 50                           | 1 5                | 0 0                          | 0 0                 | 1 5                                          | 1 5                                         | 1 5             | 0 0                         | 7 32           | 22    |
| CNN-Kunming    | 1 78                            | 1 20               | 0 0                          | 0 0                 | 2 40                                         | 0 0                                         | 0 0             | 0 0                         | 1 20           | 5     |
| CNN-Boston     | 49 78                           | 2 2                | 0 0                          | 0 0                 | 12 15                                        | 10 12                                       | 1 1             | 7 8                         | 2 2           | 83    |
Table 4. Difference in home country quotation source.

| Group        | Institutional: government/agency | Professional media (e.g. for human rights) | NGOs (e.g. for human rights) | Individual: victims, witnesses, and connection | Individual: perpetrators and connection | Individual: other | Law, orders, and documents | Not mentioned | Total |
|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------|-------|
| CCTV-Kunming | 10 31                          | 0 0                                        | 1 3                         | 5 16                                        | 0 0                                    | 4 13            | 2 6                        | 10 31 32      |
| CCTV-Boston  | 4 18                           | 0 0                                        | 0 0                         | 0 0                                         | 0 0                                    | 0 0             | 0 0                        | 18 82 22      |
| CNN-Kunming  | 0 0                            | 0 0                                        | 0 0                         | 0 0                                         | 0 0                                    | 0 0             | 0 0                        | 5 100 5       |
| CNN-Boston   | 48 58                          | 2 2                                        | 0 0                         | 12 15                                       | 10 12                                  | 1 1             | 7 8                        | 3 4 83        |
Table 5. Differences in third party country quotation source.

| Group            | Institutional: government/agency | Professional media | NGOs (e.g. for human rights) | Religious groups | Individual: perpetrators and connection | Individual: other | Law, orders, and documents | Not mentioned | Total |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------|
|                  | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    |
| CCTV-Kunming     | 9     | 28   | 1     | 3    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 1     | 3    | 0     | 0    | 21    | 66   | 32    |
| CCTV-Boston      | 3     | 14   | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 2     | 9    | 0     | 0    | 17    | 77   | 22    |
| CNN-Kunming      | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 5     | 100  | 5     |
| CNN-Boston       | 9     | 11   | 0     | 0    | 1     | 1    | 1     | 1    | 17    | 21   | 1     | 1    | 0     | 0    | 54    | 65   | 83    |

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Table 6. Differences in salient theme.

| Group       | Description and updates of the incident itself | Discuss the causes of the incident | Discuss the consequences of the incident | Present conflicting viewpoint related to the incident | Condemn the terrorist behavior and discuss the punishment/reprisal | Background/history knowledge of the incident areas | Total |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------|
|             | N     | %     | N     | %     | N     | %     | N     | %     | N     | %     | N     | %     | N     | %     |       |
| CCTV-Kunming| 13    | 41    | 0     | 0     | 5     | 16    | 1     | 3     | 13    | 41    | 0     | 0     | 32    |       |
| CCTV-Boston | 14    | 64    | 0     | 0     | 3     | 14    | 2     | 9     | 3     | 14    | 0     | 0     | 22    |       |
| CNN-Kunming | 5     | 100   | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 5     |       |
| CNN-Boston  | 49    | 59    | 11    | 13    | 14    | 17    | 5     | 6     | 3     | 4     | 1     | 1     | 83    |       |
Discussion and conclusion

China and the United States are two countries that possess differing media systems and national interests, which perhaps represent the world’s most powerful and influential international relationships. This study takes a look at the news coverage by the two countries’ leading media outlets on two remarkable terrorism incidents that took place in their domains. The results generally support our hypotheses that these media outlets cover terrorism incidents based on their distinctive ideological stances and national interests, that the two media outlets utilize different coverage strategies on the same event, and that the same media outlet also employs various coverage methods when reporting different incidents.

Although terrorism is strongly condemned by the Chinese and American governments, and each of these two countries faces its own terrorism troubles, various strategies are employed by CCTV and CNN when reporting the two significant terrorism incidents within their borders. First, the two media outlets hold differing stances toward the local government and perpetrators when reporting the same event. Likewise, the same media outlet may change its stance when reporting different incidents. On local governments’ reaction to the incidents, CCTV and CNN hold a more objective attitude, but CCTV shows a more supportive attitude toward the Chinese government’s actions after the Kunming Attack. For CCTV, with its government-ordained political stance of conveying China’s national interests, it conveyed an attitude totally supportive of the Chinese government after the incident and adopted the opposite stance toward separatist groups. National interest and the values of the Chinese governments are thus reflected in the framing strategies.

The response by the Kunming police was usually framed by CCTV as a necessary and appropriate measure to maintain social order, appearing to portray Chinese central government and local government leaders as sympathetic to the victims and residents’ well-being during and after the attack. Conversely, regarding it as a normal job, when covering local police’s reaction, CNN spent more coverage on procedure and the capture of the perpetrators. CCTV’s reporting shows adherence to its political stance with the Chinese government as a national media outlet, reflecting the Chinese government’s view that social harmony and social order are the most important issues in its policies on societal administration. As such, it is necessary for CCTV to highlight this issue to provide its Chinese readers with politically correct information and foreign readers with the Communist Party of China (CCP)’s ideology.

Second, as news origin and source can also reveal a media outlet’s hidden stance on issues, a stark comparison can be made between CCTV and CNN regarding this variable. Between the two

| Group         | Defines as a terrorist attack without reservation | Defines as a terrorist attack with reservation | Neutral/does not define its nature | Does not regard it as a terrorist attack | Total |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------|
|               | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
media outlets, only CCTV utilizes wire service or other news agencies’ articles, and not surprisingly the articles are all from Xinhua News Agency, China’s national news agency which is known as CCP’s mouthpiece. In covering sensitive terrorism issues, CCTV, also regarded as a mouthpiece of CCP and the Chinese government, usually relies on China’s official sources. For the quotation sources appearing in the articles, all two media outlets rely mostly on agency sources including government, medical agencies, and police due to the fact that most of the reliable information on the incidents’ progress can only be obtained from these sources. CNN also uses victims and their social connections as another major quotation source in relating the incidents, as well as a few sources focusing on the perpetrators. This also reveals CNN’s journalism ideology of portraying itself as caring and objective. While CCTV seldom looks for quotations other than from the government, for the Kunming Attack it also uses quotations from the victims and their families to strengthen condemnation of the perpetrators, knowing that this kind of quotation not only speaks to Chinese people’s sentiment after such a violent and shocking incident but also helps the media and the hidden government agenda behind it to promote ideals of a peaceful and unified society.

The labeling of the incident is the third index used to identify the media’s stance and function of conveying national interests. From the results, it is not difficult to see sharp distinctions between the media outlets’ reporting of different incidents. For CCTV, in keeping with Chinese government’s firm stance against the domestic separatist groups behind the Kunming Attack, almost all of the articles we studied defined the incident as a terrorist attack without any reservation. This not only pacifies the shocked Chinese population but also supports the Chinese government’s stance on anti-separatism. But coverage is different when it comes to international terrorism. China, as one of the most influential countries in the world and a major counterpart of the United States, has made clear anti-terrorism statements in the global arena but has always been cautious when it comes to terrorism related to religious groups such as Muslims, thus influencing CCTV’s reluctance to define the Boston Bombing as terrorist attacks. It takes a neutral attitude toward the incidents for they both relate to international terrorism issues that are linked to religious conflicts. CNN on the contrary, tries to show objectivity in its journalism by being neutral when defining the two incidents. However, slight dictions can still talk. There are no articles in CNN to define the Kunming Attack as a terrorist attack without reservation. Considering the sensitive relationship between China and United States, this is not surprising because the US government has been supporting the Xinjiang and Tibet separatist groups for years, and though it has never made clear statements in front of the Chinese government and Chinese people, supportive actions toward these groups can be found easily in the US government’s treatment of Dalai Lama.1 Such variations

**Table 8. Differences in incident nature describing term.**

| Group         | Terrorism/terrorist attack | Crime | Conflicts (religious conflicts, ethnic conflicts, national conflicts, etc.) | Attack/assault/bombing/stabbing/blast | Total |
|---------------|---------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------|
|               | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| CCTV-Kunming  | 28 | 88 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 32 |
| CCTV-Boston   | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22 | 100 | 22 |
| CNN-Kunming   | 3 | 60 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 40 | 5 |
| CNN-Boston    | 6 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 74 | 89 | 83 |
Table 9. Differences in incident cause attribution.

| Group         | Unfair religious/ethnic/other government policy | Civil conflicts between/among religious/ethnic/other groups | Territorial/sovereignty/separatist conflicts | Politically motivated terrorism not mentioned above | Reasons not related to the above | Not mentioned | Total |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|-------|
|               | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    | N     | %    |       |
| CCTV-Kunming  | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 2     | 6    | 6     | 19   | 0     | 0    | 24    | 75   | 32    |       |
| CCTV-Boston   | 0     | 0    | 1     | 5    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 21    | 96   | 22    |       |
| CNN-Kunming   | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 2     | 40   | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0    | 3     | 60   | 5     |       |
| CNN-Boston    | 2     | 2    | 15    | 18   | 1     | 1    | 2     | 2    | 0     | 0    | 63    | 76   | 83    |       |
between domestic and international incidents supports the findings of previous studies, such as that of Shoemaker et al. (2006), which found that the location of terrorism incidents impacts framing for news media.

The fourth variable that can verify the hypothesis is the comparison of news themes among the two media outlets. Ideology is most prevalent in CCTV’s coverage. The most salient theme when covering the Kunming Attack is condemnation of terrorist behavior discussion of punishment, while for the other two incidents, CCTV is more focused on the incident itself. As it is aligned with the Chinese government’s policy on harmonious society, CCTV must convey the stance of the CCP to the general public—in this case, showing the aim of punishing the perpetrators and maintaining social stability.

Moreover, the stated cause of the incidents provided by the media outlets is another variable used to frame the terrorist attacks. The Kunming Attack, conducted by a Xinjiang separatist group, is regarded as a terrorist attack by Chinese media. CCTV points out that the most salient cause for the incident is politically motivated terrorism, while CNN regards it as a territorial or separatist conflict. CCTV’s primary aim when reporting such incidents is to reinforce the Chinese government’s position, while CNN, which often reflects the US government’s stance and national interests, is cautious about using the term “terrorists” when describing the perpetrators.

Analyzing separately the framing strategies of CCTV and CNN when portraying the two significant terrorist attacks that took place in their respective countries, a substantial finding is that news frames for terrorism attacks align with corresponding national policies. A set of powerful, influential, and complex international relationships are at play. These relationships, and the ideological boundaries and complicated national interests that exist among the two countries, play important roles in affecting news framing. By interpreting the results of this study, we can say not so much that there are framing distinctions between the two media outlets, rather that there are distinctions among the broadcasters whose countries are intensively involved in certain ideological and national interest conflicts. When international relations are concerned in portraying politically violent incidents, the media often “rally around the flag” to reproduce in the news the definitions, agendas, and specific terms that reflect their countries’ varied ideologies and national interests.

It should be noted, however, that ideologies and national interests are among the many other determinants of discursive media content worldwide. Beyond the scope of this study, factors including organizational structures, newsroom routines, external sources, occupational traditions, and so on may also influence media portrayals of certain topics. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 1996) point out, the sources of newsroom routines include processor, consumer, and supplier; the goals, structure, economic conditions of media organizations are also influencing factors; and external impacts on media content may come from news sources, government controls, the marketplace, and technology. Future research may explore the relevance of these other factors in the specific context of media coverage of terrorism and terrorist events.

Acknowledgements
The lead author is thankful to Ms Valerie Cooper for her research assistance at the data collection stage of the study.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Note
1. Dainzin Gyaco, the 14th and current Dalai Lama in Tibet area, known as supporter of Tibet separatist groups.

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