

Paul Balluff

Media Bias in East Asia

Framing of the Umbrella Movement in English Language Online News Outlets

Topic and Research Question

The *Umbrella Movement* is embedded in a context of East Asian democratization. But to the same extent, it is also part of a resistance against China's rise. Against this backdrop, the media coverage of the Umbrella Movement is subject to an international discourse that is influenced by outwards aiming public diplomacy and inward-looking political competition.

This thesis is concerned with patterns of reporting on the 2014 protests in Hong Kong in East Asian news outlets. East Asia has a diverse news media landscape with varying degrees of government control on reporting practices. Consequently, the narratives that they produce may show substantial differences, especially news outlets that are targeting foreign audiences. This thesis aims to investigate common characteristics and differences in the framing of social protests across English news outlets from East Asia. This is relevant for political activist groups to better understand how their campaigns traverse through the international media. Thus, the main research question is:

RQ: *How does the news coverage of the 2014 protests in Hong Kong in English news outlets from East Asia compare against each other?*

Additionally, the media coverage is compared against public opinion results from the Asian Barometer Survey.

State of the Art

Lee and Chan (2018) conducted the largest study on the *Umbrella Movement* focusing on the interactions between protests participants, traditional local media, and social media. They conducted several on-site surveys, general opinion surveys, and content analyzed public posts on *Facebook*, as well as several Hong Kong based and Chinese-language newspapers. They specifically investigated the framing in opinion pieces of *local* Hong Kong media.

Feng (2017) analyzed news reports on the Umbrella Movement from four Hong Kong media for the degree on opinion expressed in them. Shahin et al. (2016) compared social protests in Brazil, India, and Hong Kong by investigating the framing of these protests in domestic media. Sparks (2015) compared the coverage of the Umbrella Movement in ten daily newspapers from the UK. He conducted a qualitative analysis of a few longer pieces and investigated their most common frames, tonality, and issue salience.

Other works that investigated the media framing of social protests in East Asia include Chiao and Huang (2017), Kim & Shahin (2020). The works by Karyotakis et al. (2017), Ha & Shin (2016, 2019), and Du (2015) investigated East Asian newspapers' coverage of protests from overseas, such as the Arab Spring.

Methodology and Approach

The framing of protests in the news media is frequently examined with content analysis techniques. Most studies investigate forms of *systematic bias* towards protest movements. One recurring pattern of negative media bias is the **protest paradigm** which constitutes the theoretical foundation for this thesis' analytical framework (Chan & Lee 1989). Media conforming with the paradigm would (1) have a negative perspective on the topic, (2) focus on violent behavior and disruptions, (3) neglect the issues and arguments raised, (4) question the legitimacy and motivations of the protesters, and (5) show a preference towards quoting official government sources rather than protest participants (McLeod 1999, McCluskey 2009, Lee & Chan 2018).

These patterns are investigated and compared with a series of automated content analysis techniques in a corpus comprising of a total of 8 English language online newspapers from Hong Kong (HK), China (CN), Taiwan (TW), and South Korea (KR). The UK based newspaper *The Guardian* is also included in the corpus to serve as a frame of reference. The employed text models are Latent Semantic Scaling (Watanabe 2020), Keyword Assisted Topic Modelling (Eshima et al. 2020), and part-of-speech tagging (*CoreNLP*, see: Manning et al. 2014, Muzny et al. 2017). Additionally, search string-based techniques are used to determine the news perspective (Rinker 2019), and salience of the issue. The results of the text models are manually validated and tested for statistical significance.

Finally, the Asian Barometer Survey Waves 3 & 4 (ABS) includes question items that gauge the respondents' views on political rights, where it also asks about the right to participate in protests. The "freedom and liberty" index as suggested by Lu (2012) is taken as a proxy value for the public opinion in East Asia on the Umbrella Movement.

Main Facts

Corpus: A total of 221,640 documents from 2014 were collected from the newspaper websites. *China Daily* (CN) provides the largest share (66,276).

Salience: A Boolean search string identified 2,197 documents mentioning the Umbrella Movement (face validity: 0.92). The highest relative visibility is in HK (3.2%), second highest TW (0.9%), lowest in UK (0.2%).

News perspective: Almost all newspapers have a tendency towards a negative perspective, except the Taiwanese ones (both scored 0.00). However, the results generated by the sentiment dictionary (Rinker 2019) are overall statistically not significant.

Violence Framing: The fitted Latent Semantic Scaling model appears to reflect important protest events (Fig 1) and has a moderate accuracy: Pearson $r(34) = 0.62$. It suggests that *South China Morning Post* (HK) has the strongest emphasis on violent behaviors (-0.134) and the *People's Daily* (CN) the least emphasis (0.449).

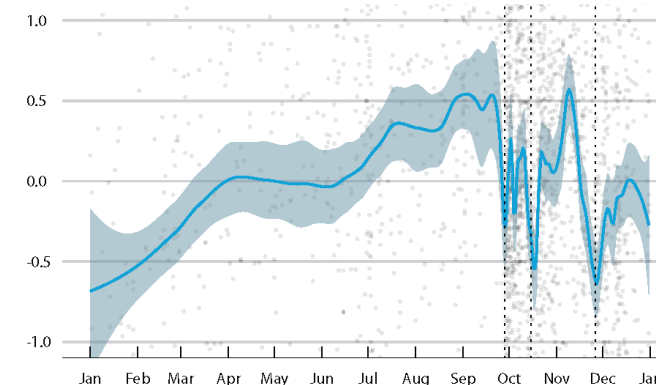


Figure 1: Latent Semantic Scaling results as longitudinal plot. Blue curve shows smoothed LSS values. Grey circles represent LSS scores of individual documents ($N = 2,197$). Dotted vertical lines from left to right: September 28, October 15, and November 26.

Cause: The Keyword Assisted Topic Model suggests that the cause is most prominent in the TW newspapers at 66%. The CN newspapers mention the cause least frequently (21%).

Foreign influence: Overall, the framing that questions the protesters' motivations and intention is rare (7.3%). But the topic model indicates that the CN newspapers use this frame in 13% of the documents. TW newspapers tend to refrain from using this framing (3.2%).

Quotations: The quotation attribution pipeline included in *CoreNLP* suggests that the CN newspapers prefer quoting government officials over protest participants. The KR newspapers are diametrically opposed in this aspect. The TW newspapers prefer quoting the protesters.

Results

HK (neutral): The two newspapers do not differ too much and have a tendency towards an unfavorable coverage. The strongest difference is in their overall visibility of the protests. They exhibit a large variety of quoted actor groups. Although the ABS suggests that the Hong Kongers' diffuse support for the freedom to protest is relatively high, it appears that the two newspapers align with public opinion reasonably well, because detailed surveys suggest that the majority disapproved of the protests (Lee & Chan 2018).

CN (unfavorable): Both newspapers are rather similar. *China Daily* has substantially more coverage of the protests than *People's Daily* does. The cause is not mentioned frequently, but foreign influences on the protesters are. The LSS model suggests that the CN newspapers avoid mentioning episodes of violence which could indicate that the newspapers want to present that the situation is under control and peaceful.

TW (favorable): The two newspapers only differ in some details. The frequent mentioning of the protesters' cause along with a preference for quoting them shows that both newspapers have a favorable view of the protesters. The ABS suggests that TW citizens are skeptical about protests which indicates that the newspapers do not fully align with this view.

KR (mixed): The two KR newspapers have opposing views, where *Chosun Ilbo* is very favorable of the protests. But visibility is rather low for both newspapers.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Paul Balluff obtained a B.A. in Political and Social Studies at the University of Würzburg. He worked in the Non-profit sector in Hong Kong for 4 years before he started the EcoS Program.

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