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RESEARCH ARTICLE

World Politics and media framing: introducing the relevance of narratives in media outlet's coverage about the Hong Kong protests

Silvia Menegazzi

Luiss Guido Carli University

ABSTRACT:

This study deals with how narratives in world politics affect media framing in different contexts by analyzing the case of the Hong Kong-Mainland China conflict, with particular reference to the Hong Kong protests occurred in the years 2019-2020. The analysis suggests a scenario in which media covering is strongly affected by the power of discourse shaping world politics, which in the case of the Hong Kong protests, it stands as a direct result of the growing exacerbation between China and the United States.

KEYWORDS:

Protests paradigm; international politics; media framing; narratives; Hong Kong.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

smenegazzi@luiss.it

1. Introduction:

What role do narratives in world politics play in influencing the media coverage of a protest movement? World politics narratives are here understood as a «subclass of discourse defined in turn as a constitutive class of meaning» (Hagstrom and Gustafsson 390, 2019). In this sense, the study of narratives and their implications at the international level either as *explanandum* (how they exercise power) or as *explanans* (what influential narratives do) is key to understand the linkage between media framing, world politics and social movements. Furthermore, with particular reference to the international news agencies' coverage, the relevance of narratives is equally important, considering that the way in which narratives are often analysed is through methodological proxies including the media sector, where «ideas and discourse are used instrumentally to co-ordinate policy-

makers, build coalitions, and otherwise unite disparate actors around a set of shared objectives» (Stanley and Jackson 2016, 226). With that in mind, this article takes into account the different narratives at stake with regards to the Hong Kong – Mainland China conflict. Particularly, reference is made to the protest that began in 2019 and which anticipated the decision by the Chinese government to approve the controversial new security law for Hong Kong, aiming at cracking down protests and banning activities considered as a danger to China’s national security. This is not surprisingly considering that since taking office in 2012, the main narrative presented by the Chinese President Xi Jinping spelled out the vision that a successful ‘One Country, Two System’ policy (一国两制 *yiguo liangzhi*) is the only way forward for a bright future with regards to Hong Kong’s relations with Mainland China. In 2019, Xi Jinping strongly condemned the situation in Hong Kong affirming that “the Chinese government is strongly determined to safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests, to implement the one country two systems policy, and to oppose any external intervention in Hong Kong internal affairs”.¹ Nevertheless, the dominant narrative about Hong Kong stands in contrast with China’s recent approach stepping in to Hong Kong’s legal framework, being the city a former British colony, and presenting important differences as compared with the Mainland, particularly when analysing the developmental path of its civil society. Politically, the colonial government always allowed a better tolerance of social protests and petitions, whereas economically, social reforms inaugurated in the 1970s encouraged social improvement and growing participation from the lower class (Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux 2009). Hence, the traditional image of Hong Kong as an economically vibrant city but politically apathetic polity faded away following the protests that gripped the city since at least 1989. In 2003, demonstrators took the streets to protest against the legislation of Basic Law Article 23. A decade later, in 2014, massive pro-democracy demonstrations occurred in favour of universal suffrage and against Beijing’s interference into Hong Kong electoral system. Known as the ‘Umbrella Revolution’, the movement is considered today as a watershed moment in Hong Kong’s post-1997 political history. On top of this, Hong Kong’s significance in international politics cannot be underestimated. According to a document published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on September 24, 2021, the US interference in Hong Kong affairs occurred at least 102 times since 2019, a fact which also highlights the relevance of the city not merely from the Hong Kong-Mainland China conflict perspective, but more broadly with regards to international affairs.

To this extent, the main goal of this article is to analyse the narratives being created by different media with reference to the Hong Kong protests occurred between 2019 and 2020 in order to assess if news frames are affected by narratives in world politics and to what extent they are rooted within the cultural, ideological, and political contexts of the countries news media outlets refer to. Based on a content analysis of 14 months coverage of major Chinese, American and European media outlets about the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests - from the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill by the Hong Kong government in March 2019 until the new security law passed by the Beijing government and entered into force on 30 June 2020 - the analysis suggests the growing relevance of narratives in world politics affecting media outlets in framing protests. This analysis uses Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow’s framework of framing process and social movements. Although Benford and Snow originally referred to this framework to show how social movement actors interpret and make sense of their collective actions, a revised version of their analysis can also be relevant to contested media framing in world politics. For instance, according to Kerry Brown, the importance

¹ ‘习近平止暴之乱恢复秩序是香港当前最紧迫的任务’ (Xi Jinping: Stop violence, stop chaos and restore order is the most urgent task for Hong Kong), Xinhua, 14 November 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/14/c_1125233663.htm

to telling a China ‘global story’ has been a striking feature of Xi Jinping leadership since he came to power in 2012 (2020). Narratives have also become key to China’s international political agenda at least since 2013, when Xi Jinping remarked in a speech to the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference the necessity to strengthen China’s external communication with the intention of “telling the China story well” (讲好中国的故事). With regards to Hong Kong, the Chinese story/narrative is rooted within China’s vision to constantly remarks intentions by the central government to exercise full jurisdiction over the special administrative region and to protect national sovereignty. European states and the United States by their counterparts, always emphasized the significant erosion of human rights and democracy in Hong Kong by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and thus, they tended to frame their narratives accordingly. In that capacity, there has been considerable attention in the intensity of media coverage over the Hong Kong protests, as in the academia working on social movements. Nevertheless, given Hong Kong’s strategic geopolitical relevance, the debate appears today extremely polarized, in which international public opinion and the media have in fact, taken sides supporting China's behaviour on an "internal issue" or defending democratic values and liberal principles. Investigations only marginally dealt with the deep rift concerning the differences in terms of how protests were reported in China and the West, but to what extent world politics’ narratives affect media framing in different contexts still rests underestimated.

1.1 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical debate this article relies on with regards to the media coverage of protests starts with the *protest paradigm* (McLeod and Hertog 1999; Shahin et al. 2016) and specifically, its *transnational* dimension (Kim and Shahin 2019). The protest paradigm is a well-studied concept in political communication. In such literature, the term is defined as a «routinized pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protests» (McLeod and Hertog 1992). According to Weaver and Scacco, public judgements of protests are shaped de facto by journalists (2012, 64). In this regard, the protest paradigm is «one framework that media scholars have used to systematically understand the specific types of frames that news media often use to weaken legitimacy, obscure a protest’s social/political concerns, or both» (ibid., 64). Implicit, within the concept, is the negative way in which protests are reported by media, considering that they are, most of the times, biased towards the status quo. More practically, this attitude contributed to disparage protesters and hinder their (sometime positive) role as vital actors on the political stage (McLeod 2007). As a theoretical framework, the protest paradigm has been used extensively by scholars in both journalism and communication studies to describe and explain protests around the world, within and across Europe, in the United States as well as in Asia. Given that protest movements and riots are conducted against the status quo, the media sector often offers a negative cover of the protests. Simply put, «the more radical a protest group is, the more negatively the mainstream media will treat it» (Shoemaker 1984, cited in McLeod 2007).

More recently however, the approach by the media vis-à-vis protests changed, showing that media coverage can be much more in synergy with protesters than occurred in the past, given the level of political and social complexity of the country in which often protests take place. Consider, for instance, the case of the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vests), a protest movement that started in France in November 2018. Protesters were against a tax system perceived as unfair and its people came mostly from peripheral towns and rural areas. While the movement fueled anti-government sentiments and heavily damaged Macron’s presidency, mainstream media in France did not demonize the protest; instead, their story was often presented as a reminder of the harsh living conditions caused by the economic crisis in Europe. For instance, *Les Echos*, France’s first daily

financial newspaper, reported that 69% of French population supported the movement, underlining its extraordinary organizational capacity.² To this extent, scholars such as Jimenez-Martinez proposed a reformulation of the protest paradigm by taking into account strategically exploited news for political, ideological and commercial purposes given different topical and temporal contexts. Notably, the mediated visibility of violence becomes instrumental to national, foreign and alternative reporters and it stresses the need to take into account the specific contexts and arrangements influencing protests coverage. As he pointed out in the case of the June Journeys protest in Brazil, highlights by reporters were based more on their preferences rather than protestors' grievances (Jimenez-Martinez 2020). On top of that, the national identity and the political orientation of a country also stand as key factors affecting media coverage, as demonstrated by Shahin's comparative analysis of the 'right to be forgotten' with regards to US and Britain media coverage (2016). In the information age, a protest movement is covered not only by domestic media but also foreign press, thus demanding stronger efforts to theorize the protest paradigm in transnational coverage (Kim and Shahin 2020). In this regard, ideological constraints, within or outside national boundaries, can influence the framing as well as the outcome of a protest movement, as it occurred in the case of the South Korean 'Candlelight' protest movement, and particularly, US media coverage's impact on such protest (ibid., 394). In that occasion, the ideological affinity between liberal publications and the conservative press in both South Korea and the United States operated transnationally to make news organizations sympathetic or hostile toward the Candlelight protest.³

Building on this line of research, this article also considers previous efforts about the manner through which national determinants (i.e., ideas, values and political contexts) of a country might influence media coverage. Yet, by questioning how these dynamics are situated in different media ecologies - embedded in turn in the global political economy of media and thus within the broader context of world politics - it treats the international arena as a key divisive factor with the coverage of protest movement by media worldwide. To criticize traditional approaches of social movements and communication studies is not the purpose of this article, but to support concrete critical engagement to move towards de-provincializing canonical social movement theory (Fadaee, 2017). For instance, Benford and Snow highlighted as the concept of 'resonance' is relevant to understand why some framings prove to be more successful than others, in particular the apparent fit between the framings and events in the world (1988; 2000). To this extent, «the more culturally believable the claimed evidence, the more credible the framing and the broader its appeal (Benford and Snow 2000, 620). Growing conflicts over human rights between China and the West have led to growing criticism with regards to China's policies about Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Remarkably, political developments in China in recent years also let the international community believing that under President Xi Jinping China has become noticeably more authoritarian, not less. More practically, within and across national borders the manner through which Hong Kong protests were covered, they re-proposed the increasingly aggravated competition of US-China relations, and more generally between China and the West. For instance, despite the US-China trade war, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, when Americans think of China, human rights are top of their mind and the Chinese government is believed to mistreat its people (Schumacher and Silver 2021). The '2020 Hong Kong Policy Act Report' published by the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs

² 'Qui sont le gilets jaunes?', *Les Echos*, 16 November 2018. Available here: <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/societe/qui-sont-les-gilets-jaunes-148033>

³ The protest refers to the 2016-2017 South Korean protests against the President Park Geun-hye. The candlelight protest is today the primary mode of public demonstration in South Korea and candlelight vigils were organized in 2002, 2008 and 2016 in the South Korean context.

openly criticized the diminished degree of autonomy by Hong Kong citizens since President Xi Jinping took power in 2012. As a response the *Global Times*, CCP's flagship newspaper, in numerous occasions attacked the US government on the issue.⁴ Similarly, EU institutions strongly condemned human rights abuses in China. Notwithstanding China being EU's second largest trading partner, in March 2021 the EU, after more than thirty years, imposed the first sanctions against Chinese individuals. De facto, contentious politics in Hong Kong is developing in parallel with an exacerbation of the above situation, and Chinese media and foreign press tended to report Hong Kong protests accordingly.

3. News framing and the Hong Kong-Mainland China conflict

China's representation by the world's media has become today a sensitive issue, particularly with regards to the domestic/internal political situation, prime among which are those topics related to territorial sovereignty and national security, i.e., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet or Xinjiang. According to Zhang, not only has the rise of China over time in the Western media increased proportionally of China's increased engagement in regional and world affairs; but change of media coverage of China is one of the factors changing countries' foreign policy toward the PRC given that news media are important sources of China information for policy-makers (Zhang 2010). In December 2019, the independent media New York-based organization, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) released a report analyzing the course of protests around the world in 2019. While the organization analyzed the coverage by the *New York Times* and *CNN* of four protest movements around the world (Hong Kong, Chile, Ecuador and Haiti) it emerged a consistent disparity with regards to the way Hong Kong protests were covered. More specifically, the study shows that journalists opted for a persistent description of violent activists in Hong Kong as pro-democracy activists but providing much less substantive evidence to the contrary. According to Boyle et al., the structural bias against protesters "compromises normative notions about objective journalism and its role in providing a fair marketplace of ideas" (2012, 128). In this regard, different Western media outlets would focus extensively and excessively on events in Hong Kong because of the geopolitical stakes behind the protests, namely, America's goal of containing and demonizing China.⁵ Besides questioning the neutrality of Western media covering the Hong Kong protests, the corporate media coverage seems to be in line with growing tensions occurring in world politics, particularly between China and the United States. Notably, growing exacerbation of US-China relations also calls into question many of the fundamental ideas that once guided the relationship such as engagement, cooperation and convergence (Medeiros 2019). Within the context of the US-China trade conflict, the European Union is also caught in what appears today a strategic dilemma and European nations are struggling to choose between the two sides. Remarkably, when President Biden called for a Summit of Democracies against the rise of global authoritarianism, the European Union responded by imposing sanctions on Chinese officials suspected of running internment camps for Uyghurs in the region of Xinjiang.⁶

Scholarship working on social movement extensively analyzed protests occurred within specific political contexts, including those where the limitation of civil liberties constraints protests. With reference to the

⁴ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220502.shtml>

⁵ Tom Fowdy, 'Why Western Media focus excessively on Hong Kong', CGTN, online, 1 January 2020, available at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-31/Why-Western-media-focus-excessively-on-Hong-Kong-MRK9ESA7Xq/index.html>

⁶ 'EU imposes sanctions on four Chinese officials', Politico, 22 March 2021, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-four-chinese-officials/>

protests in Hong Kong, the focus taken by this article scrutinizes the relevance of specific frames derived from or affected by narratives in the context of world politics. The purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of social movements and collective action frames, but to decipher to what extent the existence (but also pre-existence) of specific narratives at the international level allows correlations with regards to how protests are reported differently by media across countries. Rather than taking protests as indicators for the level of challengers to the political system, the approach uses emergence and public visibility of media frames as an indicator for the meaning contents of challenges to dominant political and cultural norms (Koopmans and Statham 2017). More precisely, given the focus on the coverage of Hong Kong protests, the term framing here refers to ‘the highlights chosen by media and journalists in reporting the protests with regards to actors and their relations’ (Harlow et al., 2020). Hence the analysis used here also considers the three core framing tasks formulated by Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000), namely “diagnostic framing”, “prognostic framing” and “motivational framing”. The first core framing task (diagnostic framing) refers to problem identification and attribution, where basically the attention is on injustice frames and their victims; the second core framing task (prognostic framing) refers to the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, that is, what has to be done. The last core framing task (motivational framing) refers instead to the rationale for engaging in collective action, particularly with reference to how engage into a construction of ‘agency’ for collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000, 615-617). Although Benford and Snow originally make reference to these three tasks to discuss how social movement actors interpret and make sense of their collective action, this tripartite framework can be appropriated or extended to contested media framing in world politics. Regarding “diagnostic framing” and with reference to media outlets across countries dealing with the Hong Kong-Mainland China conflict, it is possible to identify four different generic frames within the publications under scrutiny – pro-democracy, foreign intrusion, terrorism and human rights. *Pro-democracy* refers to direct reference within the article of the adjectival use of the term to define the Hong Kong protests by media; *foreign intrusion* refers to criticism towards the international community about China’s internal sovereignty and Hong Kong’s affairs; *terrorism* refers to narratives about Hong Kong protests making direct reference to violence by protesters and the national security law; *human rights* refers to broader contextualization of the protests within ongoing divergences with regards to conflicts over human rights between China and the Western countries. To discuss the validity of these frames, each of them can be contextualized within a master-narrative in the context of world politics. Master-narratives are intended here as deeply sedimented discourses accepted by the target-audience in order to become commonsensical and dominant (Hagstrom and Gussafsson 2019, 394). The point raised in this regard suggests that by mirroring master-narratives, i.e., China-US competition, media outlets can also become *agents of narratives*, this with direct reference to the core framing task intended as “motivational framing”. For example, in the case of media coverage in Mainland China, given the intensification of US-China competition, media framing portraying Hong Kong protests as the result of growing anti-China sentiments in the West become plausible exactly by relying on what is perceived to be from a Chinese perspective, the commonsense and dominant view about US-China competition.

2. China’s New Security Law as a case study

Since the early 2010s, the pro-democracy movement in post-handover Hong Kong resulted from two contending forces: a hybrid regime of local business elites supported by and supporting the PRC’s government and, a network of local pro-democracy parties promoting political and constitutional reform in the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). A third actor, *the localists*, has become an inexorable force in

recent years, strongly opposing to the so-called trend of ‘mainlandisation’ (Yuen and Chung 2018). To others, recent Hong Kong’s democratic backsliding stands as an illustrative case of ‘exporting authority’. More specifically, the turning point occurred in 2014 with the promulgation of the White Paper on The Practice of the ‘one Country, Two Systems Policy in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’, in which the Beijing government de facto assessed its ‘comprehensive jurisdiction’ over the Hong Kong territory.⁷ According to Lee et al., political activism in Hong Kong presents both similarities and differences as compared with past trajectories. Whereas the framing process of protesters occurred in 2019 refers to the trajectory of dissent and counter-dissent dating back to the Umbrella Movement of 2014, the latest protesters collective actions also illustrated the growing dissatisfaction of Hongkongers towards the political system and growing authoritarianism in the city following Beijing’s most recent attitude towards the HKSAR (Lee et al. 2019).

The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation

The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill is a bill proposed by the Hong Kong government in 2019 following a murder case that occurred in Taiwan in 2018, the murder of Poon Hiu-Wing. Amber Poon Hiu-Wing was a 20-years old pregnant woman killed by his boyfriend Tony Chan Tong-Kai. The couple, originally from Hong Kong went to Taipei on a trip, where the murder occurred. Given that Hong Kong and Taiwan did not share at that time an extradition bill, Tong-kai flew back to Hong Kong where he was charged only with theft and money laundering. The necessity to fill the legal loopholes served as the rationale which brought the Hong Kong government to propose the bill. Nevertheless, because of the complicated political relationship between Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, the extradition bill sparked an intense wave of protests in Hong Kong that continued until the law was formally withdrawn on 23 October 2020. The protests were caused because many people feared that to remove the restriction to extradite people to Taiwan would also remove the restriction to extradite people from Mainland China. More specifically with regards to China, under the new amendment, “as long as you are in Hong Kong, and the Chinese government believes that you have committed a crime, no matter you are a Hong Kong citizen or foreigners living, working, transiting in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government has the opportunity to extradite you to China for trial in a case-based arrangement” (Chen 2019, 135), therefore with the possibility to also threaten dissidents, business people, expats living and tourists visiting in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Zone (HKSAR). Over the last two decades Hong Kong has become the *city of protests* according to Western media. Among the many protests occurred we can mention the pro-democracy camp to fight Article 23 of the Basic Law as well as the pro-democratic Umbrella Movement in 2014 demanding free elections and political autonomy from Beijing. According to Holbig, protests that shaped Hong Kong’s image as an increasingly militant city are rooted into political, socio-economic and cultural factors. Politically, the strategic ambiguity of the ‘one country two systems’ formula originated many political cleavages. Economically, Hong Kong’s eclipse due to the rise of other Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen or Singapore in parallel with the growing presence of a nouveau riche from the mainland further exacerbated resentment with Beijing. On top of that, the social identity of Hongkongers, which claims cultural autonomy from China’s traditions and culture rests a matter of contend (Holbig 2020).

China’s New Security Law

At the time of Hong Kong’s takeover back in 1997, the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ principle was established to manage the People’s Republic of China’s relations with its Hong Kong SAR; in fact, a constitutional

⁷ http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474982986578.htm

principle admitting different political and economic system from Mainland China. This policy was initially introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. When Hong Kong, together with Macao two years after, returned to China in 1997, the Beijing government announced the intention to guarantee full respect of the policy, according to which the two special administrative regions would have been allowed to maintain their own currencies, economic and legal systems - although defence and foreign policy would have been still managed by China's central government in Beijing. Things however, turned out differently few years later, when on May 2020, the National People's Congress, China's highest legislative body, approved a unanimous decision to authorize the NPC Standing Committee to enact a National Security Law for Hong Kong without the approval of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. The law was passed, signed and activated on 30 June 2020. The 'Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region' (herein the Security Law) is the result of the shortcomings of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. Furthermore, the 'one country, two systems' formula is subjected to different interpretations by Westerners and Chinese. According to experts and scholars, the grey area of interpretations left unexplained at the time of the Declaration is what allowed Beijing's firm stance on the Security Law. More practically, the Chinese government sees the Basic Law as an ordinary law, and according to Article 158 of the Basic Law, the power to review whether the security law is compatible with the Basic Law is under the jurisdiction of the NPCSC; therefore, from a Chinese perspective the Hong Kong Security Law recently entered into force cannot be questioned (Rudolf 2020).

To what it regards the Security Law's content, it is made of a total of six chapters (1. General Principles; 2. The duties and the Government Bodies of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region for Safeguarding National Security; 3. Offences and Penalties; 4. Jurisdiction, Applicable Law and Procedure; 5. Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region; 6. Supplementary Provisions).⁸ Of particular relevance are Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. In fact, with regards to the offences and penalties chapter, the Security Law punishes crimes with up to life imprisonment such as secession, subversion, terrorist activities as well as collusion with a foreign country endangering national security. In particular, in relation to the protests the articles that present a regulatory vacuum and would have most inflamed localists and pro-democratic forces are Article 22 (4) and Article 29 (5). Substantive criticism has been generated on the fact that on the one hand offences are vaguely defined; on the other, they seem to contain explicit reference to last waves of protests occurred in the city of Hong Kong while precluding a real guarantee of respect of human rights. The Beijing government has been accused to having draft the Security Law in complete secrecy and without consulting the local legislature. Remarkably, the most substantial difference lies in the 'one country, two systems' as interpreted by China's decision-making system vs. the Western individual liberalism sphere. Whereas the intrinsic value of the law, the separation of power (judiciary, legislative, executive) is embedded in Western ideas and within Hong Kong's former British colony identity, China's tradition and its solid socialist-Leninist ideology perceives the judiciary system as part of the administration, that means, the central government. To conclude, differences with regards to ideas concerning legal autonomy from the Mainland and a constant weakening of the 'one country, two systems' principle are not the only cause, but have greatly accelerated a new wave of protests that truly never ceased in the city of Hong Kong since the Umbrella movement started back in 2014.

⁸ 'Full Text: Law on safeguarding national security in HKSAR', Chinadaily Hong Kong, 1 July 2020, available here: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/135392>

4. Media coverage and the Hong Kong- Mainland China conflict

The purpose of this article is to understand to what extent narratives in world politics influence the covering of a protest movement. To do so, it analysed the coverage of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests for a fifteen months period, from the Introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill by the Hong Kong government in March 2019 to 30 June 2020 when the New Security Law entered into force. The analysis focuses on Chinese, European and American publications, both online and printed versions. The nature of coverage included mostly news reporting and op-eds. This study is not based on a quantitative content analysis of the coverage of the Hong Kong protests. Yet, to further clarify the unit of analysis selected for the article, sources were the following: to what it concerns China-based media outlets, the selection includes *South China Morning Post*, *The China Daily*, *Global Times* (N=60). From the United States, selection includes the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (N=40). In addition, China and US publications were also supported by the analysis of major European news websites such as *Politico Europe*, the *EU Observer* and *Euronews* (N=15). The *South China Morning Post* is owned since 2015 by Alibaba Group and for this reason, commentators in the West recently questioned its neutrality about news reporting from China.⁹ Yet, it stands as one of the most authoritative voice reporting on China as well as one of the most famous English-language Hong Kong-based newspaper. Furthermore, SCMP is one of the few media outlets that has systematically archived news about Hong Kong protests in 2019-2020. Both *China Daily* and *Global Times* are owned by the Chinese Communist Party. They are representative of Beijing's foreign propaganda efforts through media influence, which since 2018 manifested a sharp uptick in the number of articles and editorials published with regards to China's growing tensions with Western countries, particularly the US. The *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were selected being the two American outlets which have covered the Hong Kong protests the most extensively. *Politico Europe*, *EU Observer* and *Euronews* were selected in order to present media coverage in Europe from an EU perspective rather than from EU member-state level only. There are clear limitations to this study that could be addressed with follow-up research. The main limitation concerns the number of articles analysed for the purpose of this paper, a small sample indeed, yet suggesting enough empirical evidence - content analysis publications from different international media - that the coverage of Hong Kong protest is affected by world politics and master-narratives. Secondly, the sampling process only analysed the time frame with reference to the Hong Kong protests occurred between 2019 and 2020. Thus, future studies might want to broaden the scope of analysis either by enlarging the time frame following the entrance into force of the law, or in a retroactive way, that is, by considering international news agencies' coverage of previous protests occurred in Hong Kong in order to understand whether they also followed a master-narrative related to world politics. Finally, future studies might want to conduct a quantitative content analysis of the coverage of the Hong Kong – Mainland China conflict through a detailed coding analysis based on the different frames discussed by the author within the article. As noticed by William H. Overholt, the story of Hong Kong always suffered from real misinterpretations in the Western press, considering that “Western understanding of ‘One country, two systems’ as it was informed by the media it is the most irresponsible sustained period of journalism in the 20th century” (2019). To this extent, the major contribution of this work is on international news coverage that has exposed the dominance of conflict in media content across countries (De Vreese et al. 2001; Camaj 2010).

⁹ <https://www.spiegel.de/international/business/south-china-morning-post-rebranding-china-abroad-a-1224273.html>

Table 1 - International politics and media framing of Hong Kong protests

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Media frame</i>
SCMP	Pro-democracy
China Daily	Foreign intrusion
Global Times	Foreign intrusion; Terrorism
New York Times	Pro-democracy
The Washington Post	Pro-democracy
Politico Europe	Human rights
EU Observer	Human rights
Euronews	Human rights

Source: Compiled by the Author

US Media Coverage of Hong Kong protests

How the new wave of Hong Kong protests occurred between 2019 and 2020 has been reported by media and journalists in the United States? In which manner the Amendment Bill and the Security Law have been framed and explained by American media? National medias in the United States stressed the identity of the Chinese government to be authoritarian and anti-democratic as a main condition causing the organization of protests. According to the *New York Times*, the new national security law is ‘devastating’ and aimed at stamping out opposition to the ruling Communist Party.¹⁰ On the whole, we can say that the *New York Times* coverage of the Hong Kong protests was far from neutral. Not only substantial attention was given to pro-democracy demonstrators, but the numerous articles strengthened a narrative in which the government in Beijing was depicted as the only responsible for the escalation of violence given its scarce availability to bargain over the protesters’ demands. By giving voice not only to journalists but also to activists, the *New York Times* openly manifested its favourable position towards the pro-democratic front. Some articles and editorials for instance, did not spare to use an openly critical language in defining the work of the Beijing government as a result of a ‘wolf-like’ style diplomacy.¹¹ *The Washington Post* instead referred to the protesters often as demonstrators. By commenting on the protests in August 2019, an editorial defined the Chinese Communist Party as ‘paranoid’ over Chinese authorities’ accusation that the protests could have been inspired by foreigners, and Americans in particular.¹² The US media coverage stands in parallel with statements published by the American government in the course of 2020: “the National Security Law is a clear breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and undermines the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ framework. It has curtailed the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong. It is clear that the National Security Law is being used to eliminate dissent and opposing political views”.¹³ Remarkably, the public opinion also followed the media frame. Public opinion polls in the United States showed that a significant portion of the population’s opinion of China has soured in recent years. Most notably, when Americans affirm that they have a negative view of China, overall, around one-in-five US adults mentioned human rights (20%) or the economy (19%) according to Pew Research

¹⁰ ‘Harsh penalties, Vahuely defined crimes: Hong Kong’s security law explained’, *New York Times*, June 30, 2020.

¹¹ ‘Give Hong Kong the Autonomy it was promised’, *New York Times*, October 1, 2020.

¹² ‘Opinion: China has misread the Hong Kong protests from the start’, *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2019.

¹³ The text was released on May 28, 2020. ‘Joint Statement on Hong Kong’, January 20, 2021, US Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-hong-kong/>

Center. In the case of human rights, some Americans described their view that the Chinese government mistreats its people. Around one-in-ten Americans (9%) specifically highlighted curtailed personal freedoms – whether in the form of censorship, the inability to protest or a lack of freedom of religion.¹⁴ At the same time, opinion polls also clearly reflect the position of the US administration with the former President Donald Trump signing the 'Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019' reaffirming and amending the United States' Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992. The new law sponsored by the Republican Senator Marco Rubio is expected to monitor and evaluate the status of democracy in the special region and particularly: demands for universal suffrage; law enforcement cooperation; sanctions enforcement; the decision-making process of the Hong Kong government; the independence of the judicial system; civil liberties in Hong Kong among which freedom of assembly and freedom of the press.¹⁵

European Media Coverage of Hong Kong protests

How the new wave of Hong Kong protests occurred between 2019 and 2020 has been reported by medias and journalists in Europe? Among Europeans media, the frame to tell the story of the Hong Kong protests was presented more or less in line with the frame presented by medias in the United States: an authoritarian China versus a pro-democracy, liberal Hong Kong. All major media outlets, from *Politico Europe* to the *EU Observer* or *Euronews*, portrayed a negative image of how the Chinese government handled the protests in the Special Administrative Region. By examining the news coverage that the protests received, one can observe the extent to which media coverage in the European region was framed in favour of the protests. An Editorial published by *The Guardian*, openly condemned the Beijing government given that “a fake narrative has been concocted, intended to mislead public opinion. It is claimed, falsely, that the demonstrators are a violent, subversive minority, that they are ‘terrorists’ and that they take orders from foreign ‘black hands’ meaning the US, Britain and Taiwan. These are chimeras of a paranoid state.”¹⁶ Another example is with *Le Monde*, the French daily newspaper, in which the frame news offered was a common picture of radical social protests, notably the police versus protesters, rioters point of views, etc. News coverage highlighted the need of protesters fighting for democracy ‘battaient pour la democracies’ and against the violent police, ‘les violences policières’.¹⁷ As with media coverage in the United States, among European States the coverage reflects the discontent repeatedly expressed by the major European institutions. Officially, the European Union manifested major concerns about China’s Security Law, and it urged China “to avoid any act which undermines Hong Kong’s autonomy in the legal field, including in terms of human rights”.¹⁸ The fact is that beyond official communications, the Hong Kong protests have begun to be used as a negative example when it appears necessary to underline the differences in values and ideologies between China and the European Union. In his remarks after the EU-

¹⁴ ‘In their own words: What Americans think about China’, Pew Research Center, 4 March 2021, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/04/in-their-own-words-what-americans-think-about-china/>

¹⁵ See for more details S.1838 – Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, 116th Congress 2019-2020, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1838>

¹⁶ ‘The Observer’s view on China’s reaction to pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong’, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/18/hong-kong-protest-china-xi-jinping>

¹⁷ ‘A Hong Kong, manifestation de colere contre le violences policières’, *Le Monde*, 12 August 2019, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/08/12/a-hongkong-la-police-reprime-violentement-les-manifestations_5498691_3210.html

¹⁸ See for instance, Declaration of the High representative on behalf of the European Union on the adoption by China’s National People’s Congress of a National Security Legislation on Hong Kong’, 1 July 2020, Council of the European Union.

China Leaders Meeting in June 2020, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, affirmed that not only real value differences exist between China and the EU, but that with regards to human rights, “democratic voices in Hong Kong should be heard, rights protected, and autonomy preserved”.¹⁹

China Media Coverage of Hong Kong protests

How the new wave of protests occurred in the city of Hong Kong between 2019 and 2020 has been reported by media and journalists in mainland China? Official media coverage from mainland China unsurprisingly fits with the protest paradigm. The *Global Times*, the daily tabloid directly under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party did not present a neutral picture of the protests in Hong Kong. First of all, the language used by journalists has been clearly directed at representing a negative image of Hongkongers taking part into the protests: activists became ‘rioters’ and protesters were labelled ‘illegal’ protesters. Secondly, it is important to discuss frames used by the *Global Times* to cover protests in the city of Hong Kong, indeed mostly two: terrorism and foreign intrusion. Harsh criticism by the media sector in China also emerged with regards to how the Western media framed the protests. An article published by the *People’s Daily* expressed a profound discontent and openly accused Western media’s coverage of the protests to be ‘biased’. More specifically, Western media outlets are accused of tarnishing the image of the Hong Kong’s police of being overwhelming pro-demonstrations.²⁰ Compared to Chinese media coverage in English language, coverage of the Hong Kong protests in Chinese language expressed even greater condemnation against Western media and government positions. An article published by the state media agency Xinhua affirmed that “the atrocities (of the protests) broke through the bottom line of human civilization, and that so-called ‘peaceful demonstrations’ had been completely torn away”.²¹ Again, the Chinese media unleashed against the American government, accused of having played an important role in inciting protests at the national level (in Hong Kong) as well as internationally - such as for instance Secretary of State Mike Pompeo supporting the protests at the Washington Economic Club on July 29, 2019.²² According to the website *abc.net.au*, Australia’s national broadcaster, there is a Hong-Kong-Beijing media war going on, resulting from the different role of media in two different Chinese societies and which highlight the issues at the core of the matter between the Special Administrative Region and the motherland.²³ Such war particularly intensified following the adoption of the National Security Law and the worsening of the media environment, with numerous pro-democracy newspapers, among which Apple Daily, Stand News, Citizen News shut down or halted operations. Notably, since the transition period (1984-1997) Hong Kong’s media sector has been concerned with the looming threat of loss of press freedom and freedom of expression (Fung 2007). Chinese media coverage follows Beijing reactions to Western countries intrusion to China’s firm condemnation of Hong Kong protests. For instance, in response to the US

¹⁹ ‘Remarks by President Charles Michel after the EU-China leaders’ meeting via video conference’, 14 September 2020, Council of the European Union.

²⁰ ‘Hong Kong protests: the unseen truth ignored by biased media’, *People’s Daily* (English version), 26 August 2019, available at: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0826/c90000-9609257.html>

²¹ ‘人民日报署名文章 煽动暴乱的恶行必将国际社会唾弃’ (Signed article by *People’s Daily*: the evil deeds of inciting riots will be cast aside by the international community), Xinhua, available at:

http://www.xinhuanet.com/gangao/2019-11/25/c_1125273235.htm

²² ‘香港乱局何时了? 中方质问美国扮演何种角色’ (Chaos in Hong Kong? China asks what role the U.S. plays), *Global Times* (Chinese version), 31 July 2019, available at: <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnK1Sy8>

²³ ‘Parallel universes: Hong Kong-Beijing media war demonstrates identity struggle at heart of unrest’, *abc.net.au*, 28 September 2019, available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-28/hong-kong-faces-crack-down-in-press-freedom-china-influence/11537816>

announcement on Visa restrictions to Chinese officials, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hong Kong condemned such decision demanding the US to stop immediately to interfere in China's internal affairs.²⁴

4. World politics and Hong Kong's media coverage

According to Peng, it is possible to divide the history of US media coverage of China into four phases. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, ideological biases dominated the media coverage on China. Then, from 1978 to 1989 the American media's image of a promising China characterized US news coverage. The years 1989-1992 saw the end of American idealism toward representing China as a reformist country ready to democratic openness. The fourth phase, from 1992 onward, media attitudes toward China are mixed: China is regarded in fact both as a strategic partner and as a potential rival (Peng 2004).

Within such a picture, the international media coverage of the Hong Kong protests thus mirrors two main master-narratives rather than one: the rise of China perceived as a threat to the liberal international order and China-US competition. Over the last couple of years, the discussion about China's stance on human rights saw the emergence of two distinct blocs in international politics, of which the debate occurred at the United Nations rests an emblematic case. With reference to this organization, the polarization sees one bloc represented by democratic countries, and a second bloc mostly represented by authoritarian states and hybrid regimes, supporting Beijing's quest for sovereignty over its territory. The former bloc, did not spare criticism on China's policy towards Xinjiang or Hong Kong. On June 30 2020 the UK's Ambassador to the WTO and UN in Geneva, Julian Braithwaite, delivered a declaration on behalf of 27 countries. In his statement, Braithwaite affirmed that the Security Law undermines the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle and urged China to reconsider it given that it erodes "the rights and freedoms that the people of Hong Kong have enjoyed for many years".²⁵ The statement was followed by Cuba's representative on behalf of more than 50 countries affirming that "Non-interference in international affairs of sovereign states is an essential principle enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and a basic norm of international relations...[I]n this context, we welcome the adoption of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as well as China's reaffirmation of adherence to 'One Country, Two Systems' principle".²⁶ Pakistan too remarked with an almost identical formula on October 6, this time on behalf of 70 countries stating that "non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and a basic norm of international relations...the HKSAR is an inalienable part of China. Hong Kong affairs are China internal affairs".²⁷ Such type of dueling statements reflects another well-known narrative in world politics, one in which the hyper-polarized categorization 'the liberal West vs. the Rest' is presented. Remarkably, according to David Bandurski, Director and Founder of the China Media Project, the global media divide over the understanding and application of human rights in international relations is occurring between Chinese state media and everything else. In particular, this is happening because

²⁴ ²⁵, Xinhua News Agency, 28 June 2020, available at:

²⁵ 'UN Human Rights Council 44: Cross-regional statement on Hong Kong and Xinjiang', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 30 June 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-44-cross-regional-statement-on-hong-kong-and-xinjiang>

²⁶ 'Joint Statement delivered by Permanent Mission of Cuba at the 44th session of Human Rights Council'. 30 June 2020. Available at: <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/hom/t1793804.htm>

²⁷ Pakistan makes joint statement at UN on behalf of 55 countries over Hong Kong issue, Xinhua 6 October 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMGSueQtESo>

principles such as non-interference and national sovereignty with regards to Hong Kong have been pushed above everything else.²⁸

4. Conclusions

The article has made an attempt to link communication studies with the social movements and international relations scholarship by focusing on media coverage of the Hong Kong protests occurred in 2019-2020. What role do narratives in world politics play in influencing the media coverage of a protest movement? With no doubts, since the beginning the extradition bill proposed by Carrie Lam has triggered a protest movement that challenged the system of governance in Hong Kong (Purbrick 2019). Certainly, the malaise of the protest goes back to discontent linking the city's relations with the government in Beijing. Yet, the attempt to pass the bill undoubtedly counted as the starting point for protests. To this point, the prolongation of demonstrations allowed foreign countries to intervene, albeit indirectly, within an issue that political elites in China consider to be a matter of internal sovereignty only, as it occurred for instance with the US government decision to pass the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019. In this regard, the way national or foreign media cover a certain protest become plausible in reproducing master-narratives at inter-state relations levels. A first intent of this paper was to demonstrate the relevance of world politics when dealing with the protest paradigm and the way it affects the coverage of social protests. To this extent, it engaged with this special issue in supporting the view that to strengthen a truly global dialogue about social movement studies also requires a truly 'global' and multidisciplinary approach.

However, a second intent was to examine differences at place between Asia and the West with regards to protest coverage specifically with a focus on China-related issues. Previous studies highlighted ideological affinities in terms of news coverage between countries with regards to protest movements (Kim and Shahin 2019; Weaver and Scacco 2013). Through the sources consulted, this study demonstrates the relevance of narratives in world politics not merely as a tool to explore social movements but the agency of media framing in covering social movements and protests. If media in the West framed protests as flagship for political struggle against Chinese authoritarianism, in China the narrative of reference is rather different. The protests and protesters, from a Chinese point of view incited indeed by the West, become the reason to underline the non-acceptance of Chinese values at the expenses of universal ones, among which those relating to human rights present the greatest divergence at the moment. The social movement framing literature suggests that meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practises, values, myths, narratives and the like are an important tool kit to understand how cultural elements affect collective actions and social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). In general, as it occurred with the portrayed 2013 Cypriot protests, protest paradigm framing patterns tend to be very different with regards to media coverage, and most importantly, the geopolitical reach of the protests, as well as the political contingencies and media interactions with political elites are important factors (Papaioannou 2019). As the case of 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests suggests, to overcome division and bias to how the Global North – as well Northern social movement studies – thinks about protests and social movements from the Global South - require media framing patters to be studied and their vision integrated within the global public and political debate but possibly, with no political-emotional perspectives.

²⁸ 'China's silent Axis on Human Rights', China Media Project, 9 July 2020, available at: <https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/07/09/chinas-silent-axis-on-human-rights/>

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Author's Information

Silvia Menegazzi is Adjunct Faculty at the Department of Political Science, Luiss Guido Carli University. Her research interest cuts across International Relations and Chinese Studies with a focus on non-governmental actors and international organizations. She is the author of *Rethinking Think Tanks in Contemporary China* (Palgrave 2017) and *New Regional Initiatives in Chinese Foreign Policy: the incoming pluralism of global governance* (Palgrave 2018, with Matteo Dian). She has also been published in a variety of publications including East Asia Forum and China Brief.