

Framing the TikTok ‘war’ in the New York Times, Times of India & China Daily

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Abstract

Chinese digital enterprises e.g., Baidu, Alibaba and ByteDance (known for Toutiao and TikTok) contribute greatly to the expansion of China’s global presence and influence as a digital powerhouse, adding a ‘social’ dimension to China’s soft power (Yu, 2019). China’s latest tool for cultivating soft power, TikTok, has been attracting much attention.

Unlike most research on social media as a country’s soft power toolkit, this research looks at TikTok not for its contents or the range of actors in communicating with foreign audiences; but rather as a technological company subjected to a ban in India and a potential ban in the US. To understand how the Sino-Indian and Sino-US disputes about TikTok are framed in news coverage and its potential relevance to China’s growing digital capabilities, the research conducts inductive frame analysis on TikTok dispute news coverage in leading national papers in the US (*The New York Times*), India (*The Times of India*) and in China’s global English language news outlet *China Daily*.

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Background:

Since joining the World Trade organization in 2001, China has become a major economic player globally and it has also increased its military presence. Explorations of the rise of China often centre on China's tangible power such as its increased economic or military resources (Nye, 2021) and less attention is paid to its efforts in the field of public diplomacy, especially when it comes to digital technologies. Today, countries' use of media for public diplomacy has shifted from news media to social media platforms. China's latest tool for cultivating soft power, TikTok, has been attracting much attention. The app is one of the biggest global media breakthroughs of the generation, it is now available in 155 countries, serving 75 languages, being one of the most downloaded apps in *The 2020 Rankings by Market Downloads* (App Annie, 2020). Many believe that TikTok takes on a digital diplomatic role in promoting the country's soft power (Gibson, 2021), a Chinese digital enterprises, digital unicorns and high-tech start-ups e.g., Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and ByteDance (known for Toutiao and TikTok) contribute greatly to the expansion of China's global presence and influence, by adding a 'social' dimension to China's soft power (Yu, 2019). In 2020 India and the US imposed or proposed to impose a ban on this seemingly frivolous juvenile application. These actions were part of broader ongoing conflicts, in the case of the US Presidents Trump's 'trade war' and in the case of India a long-running border dispute.

Objective(s):

Unlike most research on social media as a country's soft power toolkit, this research looks at TikTok not for its contents or the range of actors that can use it to reach foreign audiences and potentially influence their views; but as a technological company that has been the subject of a ban in India and a potential ban in the US. To understand how the Sino-Indian and Sino-US disputes about TikTok are framed in news coverage and its potential relevance to China's growing digital capabilities, the research conducts inductive frame analysis on the news coverage related to the dispute over TikTok in leading national papers in the US (*the New York Times*), India (*The Times of India*) and in China's global English language news channel *China Daily*. The research provides an understanding towards

Chinese digital infrastructure's growing capabilities as China's dominance on the global technology market – particularly in relation to social media.

Method:

The following research questions are addressed in this paper:

How are China's digital capabilities and their potential to influence China's perception in foreign countries addressed in the news coverage of the Sino-Indian and Sino-US dispute over TikTok?

Sub-questions:

1. In what ways is the run-up to and the actual ban of TikTok framed in Indian news coverage?
2. How is the potential ban on TikTok framed in US news coverage?
3. How is the dispute over TikTok with India and with the US framed in Chinese English language news intended for a global audience?

This research uses a qualitative approach and provides an inductive frame analysis of news coverage on the TikTok dispute in selected US, Indian and Chinese news outlets.

The research adopts Thomas Streeter's (2009) guide used at the University of Vermont and also insights from VanGorp's work (2005) in creating a matrix for each outlet. The categories used in the matrix include the following: Emphasis in coverage; Master narrative and themes; Stylistic clues and Underlying assumptions of the frame. The master narrative and themes took into account Entman's (1993) 4 categories: define problems; diagnose cause; judgement; proposed remedy. The researcher coded the news articles, extrapolated the data for the matrix and finally identified dominant frames.

The sample for frame analysis was yielded from three news outlets: 1. *The New York Times (NYT)* 2. *The Times of India (ToI)* 3. *China Daily (CD)*. These outlets were chosen for two main reasons: 1. To include news coverage that targets domestic US and Indian audiences and 2. To include news coverage that is closely associated with the CCP's views and aimed at a global audience. The *NYT* is a US-based newspaper; it is privately owned and independent of direct government control. It was selected to provide insights into the Sino-US controversy over TikTok. *ToI* is a leading English-language center-right paper, it is also privately owned, and independent of direct government control. *ToI* coverage is analysed to uncover frames related to the Sino-Indian dispute over TikTok and its ban. *CD* is one of China's English-language news outlets aimed at a global

public. It is owned by the Propaganda Department of the CCP. *CD*'s coverage is thus close to the official Chinese government line on the Sino-India and Sino-US TikTok dispute.

Results:

In fact, the research found an acknowledgement of TikTok's global popularity and its importance in the international technology market in the *NYT* and *ToI* coverage. While *CD* shows little emphasis on the scale of TikTok, it downplays the app's popularity in coverage. As expected, the US, India and China adopt different frames in addressing TikTok as China's digital capabilities and its controversies. The Indian perspective as represented by the *ToI* frames TikTok as both China's soft and hard power, represented through emphasis on TikTok's popularity and its threatening digital capabilities towards India's security. This suggests the app as an exemplification of Nye's (2004) smart power – the complimentary use of hard and soft powers. The *NYT*'s perspective on the proposed ban does not focus on China or the app's potential hard or soft power, but rather the Trump administration's actions in relation to the US's values of free-market and democracy. In contrast, *CD* as the Chinese government's mouthpiece shies away from addressing TikTok's power. Rather, it focuses on the Sino-US trade, as well as the US's actions in restricting Chinese tech companies. Yet, both *CD* and *ToI* tend to reply heavily on voices in favour of the government. *CD*'s coverage skews towards Chinese diplomats' voices, whereas, *ToI*'s uses more varied quotations such as military representatives and TikTok users' voices in supporting the government's viewpoint as the Sino-India conflict. China and India's media coverage of TikTok's disputes indicates the politically fuelled role TikTok plays in the global tech market as well as the media serving as the government's mouthpiece. In contrast, the *NYT* shows a greater variety of viewpoints as the frame is focused more on TikTok's company and Trump administration's action rather than on the Sino-US conflict.

Future Work:

Unavoidably this research has its limitations, however, its focus on digital capabilities and their potential for influencing foreign publics as reflected in bilateral disputes opens up a new area of research. The US's digital capabilities and dominance on the global technology market – particularly

in relation to social media giants e.g. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube – is worthy of similarly conceptualized research.

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