

# Framing hong kong occupy central movement: a comparative analysis of newspapers

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



This dissertation intends to explore how different English-Language newspapers in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan frame the Occupy Central Movement that took place in Hong Kong in 2014. The entire study is based on theories and ideas of news frame and social movement news framing. The empirical research was conducted through a content analysis of qualitatively coding 180 news articles from 5 different newspapers in the 3 regions, followed by the analysis of quantitative data and results. The variables in the coding structure were drawn from the understanding of the literature review. Studies on protest coverage often emphasizes on the use of different news frames to shape audience's understanding of the event, while other elements in a news article such as keywords and sentiments can also be indicators of the outlet's attitude towards a political event. The results found that Conflict frame was the dominant news frame amongst the coverages; there was a rise in frame that marginalised the movement and anti-movement sentiments towards the 2nd phase of the movement.

## Introduction

The Occupy Central Movement, also known as the Occupy Central with Love and Peace, took place in 2014 had undoubtedly been the most significant social and democratic movement in Hong Kong since the handover in 1997. The occupy protest movement was widely covered by news outlets around the world, as it was seen to be a critical moment to Hong Kong's democratization and a challenge to Beijing's authority over the special administrative region. Given the international attention of the movement, English-language newspapers that were close to the event and the region

would play a very important role in informing news readers and journalists from different parts of the world, these news outlets could powerfully shape the international perception of the occupy movement. Amongst the Chinese-speaking regions, namely Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, there are some prominent and highly influential English-language newspapers with high number of readership; this research intends to explore how these newspapers reported the movement differently, to identify the news frames their journalists used and spotting changes of pattern during the movement.

A literature review on news frames, news framing in social movement and objectives of English-language news in the region is essential in providing a strong foundation of theoretical understanding for the result analysis in the latter part of this research. Content analysis has been employed as the research method, through manually coding 180 articles from 5 different English-language newspapers in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan - Global Times, China Daily, South China Morning Post, Taipei Times and The China Post. The analysis and discussion of the findings will then follow.

## Background

Democratisation has long been a highly debated issue in Hong Kong politics and society as the implementation of universal suffrage in the former British colony was an agreement between the Chinese and British authorities from the handover negotiation, and this matter is marked and written down in the Article 45 of Hong Kong's mini constitution -the Basic Law.

Chinese authority's clear intention of delaying the democratization process in Hong Kong caused mounting public's frustration with the Hong Kong and Beijing governments. An official proposal plan from Beijing regarding the 2017 electoral reform of Hong Kong regarding the method of selecting the Chief Executive was expected to be published in 2014.

In 2013, Benny Tai, an associate professor of the University of Hong Kong, published a news article suggesting that if the Chinese authorities and Hong Kong government failed to deliver a genuinely free and fair electoral reform plan, Hong Kong people should occupy Central, the city's major financial and business district, as an act of civil disobedience to express frustration and force authorities to respond.

Chinese authority eventually introduced the White Paper regarding Hong Kong's electoral reform in August 2014, which ruled that all candidates for the Chief Executive election must be approved by China's National People's Congress before being named on the ballot paper. This effectively means that only pro-Beijing candidates would be allowed to run in 2017 and pro-democracy candidates would be banned from participating in the election.

University students in Hong Kong decided to conduct a class-boycott movement in late September as a response to Beijing's decision. On 28th September 2014, Benny Tai announced to launched Occupy Central, people and students occupied the main roads outside the Government Complex and subsequently other busy areas in different parts of Hong Kong were also occupied. Police fired tear gas and pepper spray at occupiers on the same

day while occupiers used umbrellas to defend themselves from police's action, such confrontational scenes had given the protest an unofficial name - the Umbrella Movement.

### Defining News Framing

News framing is a concept or tool used by journalists and news outlets to shape the perception of a particular event. Entman suggests that framing means the 'selection of some aspects of a perceived reality'; while Gamson (1989) writes that frames are 'interpretative packages that give meaning to an issue.' Tuchman (1978) writes that citizens would 'discuss public events' within the framework set by journalists in the media. Based on these basic definitions of frame theory by different scholars, in the context of news framing, journalists interpret and define an issue or event, by selecting and presenting certain aspects and inevitably excluding and ignoring some other aspects. In other words, a news story can be approached and written in different angles, depending on what way the journalists want their readers to perceive the event.

Some may see news framing from a more positive angle as frames could allow newsreaders to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' key information and conduct interpretation and evaluation of a particular event. Reese (2001) writes that news frames could "provide structure" to a story which aim at helping audiences to understand complex issues. This type of definition means news framing fulfills public interest by allowing citizens to

gain knowledge and have a clear and better understanding of issues in their society.

On the other hand, some scholars are more critical towards news framing, as Gitlin (1980) writes news framing is merely a process of 'persistent selection, emphasis and exclusion', meaning the public could not perceive the full picture and detail of public events. The fact that news frames have the power "to shape public perception of political issues or institutions' has put journalists and news outlets in very powerful position where they could exclude certain aspects of a news story to manipulate public's perception, and that could compromise the truthfulness and credibility of news and the integrity of press' 'Fourth Estate' role in society.

There are also scholars who believe framing is a strategic communication tool as it involves 'subtle alterations in the definition of judgement or choice of problems'. For example, certain news frames highlight the significance of the consequences of the issue rather than the issue itself, which is a prominent feature in the context of this research, as economic and societal consequences were the main focuses of certain newspapers' coverage of the Occupy Central Movement throughout the duration of the event. Framing news stories also allows journalists to enhance the meaningfulness of the perceived realities as it 'promotes particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation'.

News frames can be detected through the identification of 'patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation', while an examination of the

selection and exclusion of “ certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images and sources of information” can also assist in spotting news frame in news articles. In covering a political event, every news outlet might have their own stance or approach towards the event, and they tend to repeatedly use certain keywords and images in their news articles to describe and give meaning to the event, with the hope of subsequently shaping the audiences’ perception of the event. For example, in the context of social movement which is the focus of this research project, a protest or demonstration can be associated with and defined by a range of words such as ‘ revolution’, ‘ riot’ and ‘ movement’ etc, but each of these words can have different influence over audiences’ understanding and feeling of the protest. Therefore a repeating use of one of these keywords in the coverage of a social movement can have an effect of reinforcing a certain intention, political stance and judgment made by a news outlet.

In the research field of news framing theory, there has been a rich variety of news frames identified by many scholars. Neuman’s work (1992) was one of the earliest accounts of news framing and it presented few central frames in interpreting public issues, namely the economic frame, conflict frame, powerlessness frame and human impact frame. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) adopted most of Neuman’s account and developed their own set of five most commonly used news frames with the addition of the responsibility frame. These general news frames could provide us a better understanding of what news framing is and some of these frames could be applied in the research of social movement.

The economic frame, perhaps one of the most commonly used news frames, has been applied by the media in a broad range of issues. This is because of the human nature of greed and profit motives in a world dominated by capitalist values, the economic frame is the most effective frame of attracting attentions from the public.

Conflict frame is a news frame that highlights the conflict between individuals or groups as a means of making news stories more intriguing and attracting more audience. This frame usually applies to political issues as the media tends to interpret the political world as a dichotomous, polarised competition and 'an ongoing series of contests.' Politics is certainly more complicated than simply a two conflicting sets of ideas but the media's attempt to narrow it down into a two-sided race, not only could it attract more audience, but also help the public to understand political matters in a much simpler way. Political news in Hong Kong would be a great example of the conflict frame, as newspapers tend to emphasise on the adversary attitude between the pro-establishment and pro-democracy camps, and associate everything with this dichotomy while actual analysis of policy and governance could sometimes be neglected.

The human impact frame is also a very commonly applied frame in the news, which is a frame that can effectively trigger and influence audience's emotions as it is seen as 'an effort to personalise, dramatise and emotionalise the news'. This frame can generate people's feelings and subsequently shape the public's attitude towards the reported event, whether it could be empathy, frustration or anger.



The responsibility frame emphasises on the attributing responsibility to an individual or group regarding the cause of an event or issue. This is to give public an understanding of who is responsible to be blamed for a problem and who to take care of the problem.

### News Frame and Social Movement

Frame Theory might have provided a broad and general explanation of how the news media shape and interpret events and issues, but as this research focuses on the framing of an occupy moment, it is important to study news framing literatures regarding the reporting of social movement. News media has always been seen as playing the key role of agenda-setting in society while a social movement requires media attention, how different news outlets shape the perception of a social movement differently, not only can it reinforce the political stance of a news outlet but also shape public's opinion towards the movement. McLeod and Hertog (1999) introduce a variety of frames that are usually applied in reporting social movements. The balanced frame provides a fair and neutral judgment of the movement with a variety of viewpoints being presented. This is perhaps the most desirable and ideal approach of journalistic practice but it is also the least common approach amongst all news frames on protests. The sympathetic frame intends to shape the protest in a positive way, and to create public's sympathy for the protesters. This frame is usually applied through the ' unjust prosecution of protesters' and police's fierce handling of protesters during the movement. A mixed frame includes a variety of news frames and perspectives in order to provide an adequate and substantive account of the event. However the

most common and regularly seen frame of all is the marginalizing frame, through which journalists seek to 'trivalise, marginalize and even demonise radical forms of social protest'. Under this frame, protesters are often labeled as the troublemakers who disrupt society's stability, and the protest is negatively portrayed by journalists, where the cause and objective of the movement can be neglected or excluded and certain protesters' actions are exaggerated and demonised.

McLeod and Hertog's account has given the field of social movement framing a broad understanding, and given the fact that the marginalizing frame is perhaps the most common frame in reporting protests, it should be explored further through other scholars' accounts. The concept of protest paradigm is able to provide a much more substantive analysis to news coverage of social movement. The protest paradigm can be defined as a routine pattern of delegitimation of social movements that in the news. In other words, movements that attempt to promote social change or challenge established powers tend to be negatively portrayed in news coverage. The protest paradigm helps researchers to understand how certain types of news frames are used in the news media to undermine the legitimacy and influence of a social movement, therefore although social movements need to media attention, some could argue that news coverage would 'end up diminishing a social movement instead of enhancing it.'

The protest paradigm broadly lays out three key tools that news outlets use in covering social movements, and they are marginalizing story framing, reliance on official sources and information, and the invocation of public

opinion. Firstly, the marginalizing frame puts the movement and protesters in a negative position, which emphasises on how the movement disrupts society's order and the violence of people who are involved. Under this frame, protesters are often labeled as radicals or extremists who fight for some kind of political objectives that only represent a minority in the society. Thus protesters would then be seen by the public as those who act against the norm and overly dramatise certain extreme political agenda. This marginalizing frame usually shapes protest-related stories in a dichotomous nature with protesters on one side and government or establishment on the other side; by placing the protesters in a distant and minority position in the news stories, it could create a sense of 'otherness', which could further undermine the movement's legitimacy.

Secondly, journalists' reliance on official source of information in writing their news stories is another phenomenon in news coverage during a social movement. This would indeed result in a 'dominance of official viewpoints and problem definitions.'