

Troubled Democracy: The Messaging of Democracy on CGTN Facebook and Instagram

Keyu Alexander Chen Glanz¹

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Abstract

The intensifying China-U.S. rivalry, now evolving into a broader ideological competition between autocracy and democracy, highlights the significance of studying “democracy” as an ideograph. This study examines how the rhetoric of “democracy” is employed in the public diplomacy efforts of China Global Television Network (CGTN), the main media platform for China’s global information campaign. By combining computer-assisted topic modeling with qualitative analysis, the study explores CGTN’s messaging on “democracy” across Facebook and Instagram over five years (2019-2023). The findings reveal that CGTN generally frames “democracy” in a negative light, associating it with institutional inefficiency in the Global North and with political violence and social disorder in the Global South. These results suggest that China seeks to expand its global influence and shape international governance by redefining “democracy” in its ideological competition with the U.S.-led West.

Keywords: democracy, ideograph, CGTN, public diplomacy

Introduction

¹ PhD Candidate and Transcultural Conflict and Violence Presidential Fellow at Department of Communication, Georgia State University

The ongoing rivalry between the People's Republic of China and the United States is not limited to trade disputes, as seen under the first Trump administration. The competition between the two powers has expanded to values and political visions under the Biden administration. In particular, President Biden perceives the world as an ideological competition between democratic institutions and autocratic regimes. The hosting of the "Summit for Democracy" is an example. From December 9 to 10, 2021, the Biden administration held a virtual conference, "Summit for Democracy", which brought together the leaders of democratic countries and civil societies to renew their shared efforts to consolidate democratic institutions in the age of authoritarian revival, threats, and challenges. The summit intended to emphasize the efforts to "counter authoritarianism, combat corruption, and promote respect for human rights" (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The People's Republic of China, not among the invited participants, perceived the move of the Biden administration as an attempt to isolate and antagonize China's political system and, therefore, launched a series of propaganda campaigns to assert the legitimacy of its regime. The Chinese government released a White Paper titled "China: Democracy that Works" (Hale, 2021) and hosted its version of the "International Democracy Forum" (Lo, 2021) to promote its own "democratic model". At the same time, the Chinese diplomats and state-owned media launched rhetorical attacks on the legitimacy of the U.S.-style democracy. For example, the state-owned tabloid Global Times cast doubt on the U.S.-organized Summit, calling it an "anti-China ideological clique" (Chen et al., 2021).

This study intends to explore "democracy" as an ideograph, examining how <democracy> functions in China's global information campaign. Studying this is important amid the heightened democracy-autocracy rivalry (Kroenig, 2020), particularly the increased rivalry between the world's largest economies, the U.S. and China (Schneider-Petsinger et al., 2019). Democracy is under threat because authoritarian regimes become bolder and more aggressive in state behaviors in the economy (Gueorguiev et al., 2020) and military fronts (Bove & Brauner, 2016). However, it is little known how modern authoritarian regimes attempt to modify or

deconstruct the meaning of democracy to improve their legitimacy in the global community.

This study focuses on the Chinese context, exploring how the CGTN, China's major platform for global information campaigns, messages <democracy> to its global audiences.

Democracy as an ideograph

Ideographs are key terms that encapsulate an ideological orientation, linking language to underlying beliefs (McGee, 1980, p.7). These terms in political discourse symbolize broader ideologies, serving as tools for social control over collective consciousness by embodying ideas that justify specific beliefs and attitudes (McGee, 1980). When ideographs appear in everyday language, they reinforce prevailing ideologies, making challenges to these norms appear shocking to those within the affected society (Foss, 2017). Ideographs are not created in a vacuum; they emerge from real life, with their meanings shaped by the social and cultural contexts where a consensus on norms, ideals, and values already exists (McGee, 1980; Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001).

Ideographs can convey both positive and negative connotations. For instance, terms like <freedom>, <liberty>, <equality>, and <justice> serve as ideographs deeply embedded in American liberal democratic culture (see McGee, 1980; Guitar, 2020). Conversely, negative ideographs denote behaviors deemed unacceptable by a society, such as <terrorism>, <dictatorship>, <slavery>, and <tyranny> (Amjad & Afsar, 2021; McGee, 1980; Winkler, 2006). Together, these ideographs represent what is collectively considered acceptable or unacceptable within specific cultural contexts.

Examining the four main characteristics of ideographs helps us understand how <democracy> functions as an ideograph in U.S. society and culture. First, ideographs are “ordinary language terms found in political discourse” (McGee, 1980, p.15), meaning they are not just used by political elites but also permeate everyday conversations among the general public. They form part of the public vocabulary, essential to defining community life (Condit & Lucaites, 1993, p. xiv).

Second, ideographs are “a high order of abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” (McGee, 1980, p.15). This abstraction allows for flexibility in their meaning and interpretation, enabling rhetoricians to craft specific meanings in public discourse to persuade audiences about historically specific beliefs and actions (Condit & Lucaites, 1993, p. xiii).

The third characteristic involves the justification of power. Ideographs “warrant the use of power, excuse behavior and belief that might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guide behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable” (McGee, 1980, p.15). They are used to justify decisions and motivate behaviors (Jasinski, 2001, p. 309).

The fourth characteristic is that an ideograph’s meaning is “embedded in cultural context as a prerequisite for belonging in society” (McGee, 1980, p.15). Ideographs are bound by culture, and to engage in a rhetorical culture, one must adhere to its ideographs, using them in ways that the audience deems reasonable (Condit & Lucaites, 1993, p. xiii). Ideographs used for persuasion must resonate across cultures, making them comprehensible within specific social, political, and cultural contexts.

The fluidity of ideographic meanings allows for scholarly exploration of their competing aspects. Ideographs can be central to ideological struggles and cultural contests (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). Conflicts between individuals and powerful institutions often revolve around meaning and communication (Eagleton, 2014). Because of their inherent vagueness, ideographs are susceptible to manipulation or change, either by those seeking ideological dominance or by those aiming to attract more followers to their political agendas or values.

In summary, <democracy> can function as an ideograph. The term is embedded in everyday language and culture, not only within the American context but also in any context where a government seeks to present itself as a democracy. The term has flexible interpretations. Amid the political polarization within the U.S., both Republicans and Democrats claim

themselves as the defender of democracy while portraying the rival party as “undemocratic”. Also, <democracy> warrants the use of power especially in an international context when the United States launched military actions in the name of “democracy”. Eventually, <democracy> is bound by social, cultural, and political contexts. China and North Korea claim themselves to be democratic but with divergent meanings embedded in political environments.

From Mao to Xi: the rhetoric of democracy in China:

The rhetoric of democracy in the People’s Republic of China has evolved through generations of leadership since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. It evolved from Mao Zedong’s “new democracy” and “people’s democratic dictatorship” to Deng’s emphasis on “democratic centralism”, to Jiang’s competitive lens of “democracy”, to “inner-party democracy” during Hu-Wen administration, “whole-process democracy” under Xi Jinping.

Mao Zedong’s “people’s democratic dictatorship” intended to create a dichotomy of “we” and the “other”. While “people” refers to the peasants and proletarians, the other classes fall into the “other”. Through the creation of an oxymoron that combines two completely contradictory terms, “democratic” and “dictatorship”, the Party-State mandated “democracy” to some dominant working class (peasants and proletarians) on the one hand while putting other classes (landlords and capitalists) under dictatorship and oppression of the dominant classes on the other. Indicative of class struggle, the Chinese Communist Party intended to create a classless utopia through the “democratic dictatorship” (e.g., Steiner, 1950; Young, 1986).

Under Deng Xiaoping, the second generation of leadership emphasized the “healthy exercise of democratic centralism” (Boer, 2021) as an inseparable part of Chinese socialism to reverse the cult of personality under Mao. For Deng (1978), the social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution derives from the disproportionate centralization of power, the one-person leadership, and the lack of guidance in grassroots democracy. Still, Deng’s understanding of democracy,

while diverging from the Western concept of “election” and “civil liberties”, focuses more on encouraging the people to speak out, complain, and critique the Party (Deng, 1998).

After the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, Jiang Zemin, the third generation of the Communist Party leadership, conceived of “democracy” through a more comparative and competitive lens with Western-style democracy. For Jiang (1996), democracy is a universal value but specific to its context and constrained by tradition, economy, and education of the people. While accusing the West of exerting political influence or seeking regime change in the name of “democracy” and “human rights”, Jiang (1996) advocated that Chinese democracy represents the “best-in-class” democratic institutions for the Chinese people because it suits China’s national condition.

Despite little substantial progress in political reform and democratization, the fourth generation of leadership under Hu Jintao promised to expand “inner-party democracy” in expanding democracy “in work related to cadres and make democratic recommendations and assessments more scientific and authentic” in his report to the 17th CPC Party Congress in 2007 (China Daily, 2007). Although the “inner-party democracy” seeks to legitimize the one-party rule (Holbig, 2007), it raised the prospect and expectation of expanding democracy beyond the party (Li, 2009). Meanwhile, former Premier Wen Jiabao discussed the democratic prospects in China on several occasions. In a 2010 interview with CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria, Wen described democracy in dimensions of democratic election, independent judicial system, and the oversight of governance by the people (CNN, 2010). The rhetoric of democracy in the fourth generation of leadership promoted academia to speculate about China’s democratic prospect and the probability of incremental democratization towards the Western universal standards (e.g., Yu, 2010; Fewsmith, 2013).

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese government rebranded “democracy” as , . Xi Jinping proposed this term for the first time in November 2019 when he visited a local community in Shanghai. Although Xi himself stopped elaborating on it, China’s state-owned newspaper, Guangming Daily, contrasted Xi’s “whole-process democracy” to the Western-style “one-time

democracy”, arguing that democracy is measured by public participation and the participation goes beyond election cycles (Guangming Daily, 2021). In the White Paper, “whole-process democracy” was defined as the democratic modal that “integrates process-oriented democracy with results-oriented democracy, procedural democracy with substantive democracy, direct democracy with indirect democracy, and people’s democracy with the will of the state.” (Xinhua, 2021)

In sum, as an ideograph, <democracy> has undergone significant shifts in meaning and interpretation throughout various leaderships in China. Each administration of Chinese leadership has redefined <democracy> to align with its specific political agenda and governance model. Under different administrations, the concept of <democracy> has been adapted to reflect the priorities and ideological stance of the ruling party, often emphasizing collective well-being, social stability, and the centralization of power over individual freedoms and electoral processes that are aligned with Western democratic models. These shifts illustrate how <democracy>, as an ideograph, is not static but evolves in response to the changing political landscape and leadership goals, reflecting the broader ideological struggles within China’s governance and its positioning on the global stage.

However, how <democracy> functions in China’s public diplomacy efforts was understudied. The exploration of the research question speaks to how China or its state-backed media platforms attempted to project its interpretation of <democracy> in the global community as a part of its efforts to enhance its soft power. For Chinese President Xi Jinping, China’s tainted reputation as an authoritarian state does not match its image as a rising military and economic power and its aspired status as a global leader. According to Xi (2015), the country, under the previous generations of leadership, solved the issue of “being beaten” (挨打) through national independence and the issue of “being starving” (挨饿) through economic development of prosperity, but has yet to solve the issue of “being scolded” (挨骂) (para. 42).

Thus, China is motivated to challenge and reinterpret <democracy> to counter its portrayal as an authoritarian regime and to promote its governance model as a legitimate alternative.

This study intends to address the gap, asking how the CGTN talks about <democracy> on its Facebook and Instagram platforms.

Data and methods

This study collected 318,601 Facebook and Instagram posts from CGTN's English-language and continent-specific accounts through CrowdTangle, a META search platform. The study spanned five years from September 1, 2018, to September 1, 2023. The examined account pages included CGTN Flagship, CGTN America, CGTN Africa, and CGTN Europe, all in English. To focus on China's messaging democracy promotion, we filtered the original corpus through an English-language search word list about democracy for a total of 56 words (see Appendix 1), reducing the corpus to 47,285 posts.

This study employed BERTopic to produce the topical structure of the economic sub-corpus. Python-based BERTopic modeling is a technique that can reveal multilingual embeddings (Wolf et al., 2019; Grootendorst, 2022). The code was provided by Ayse D. Lokmanoglu (2024). This study fine-tuned the parameters to ensure each topic included at least one percent of the documents. BERTopic modeling computationally assigned labels to the clustered documents, while categorizing documents that were difficult to cluster as outlier topics. This study used OpenAI to label the topics based on the most representative documents, or put another way, the CGTN posts with the highest probabilities of belonging to the topics. The author checked the most representative documents to validate the appropriateness of the reassigned labels.

Findings

The democratic corpus of CGTN’s Facebook and Instagram accounts included 19 dotpics. Those topics are China’s foreign policy and geopolitics, political dynamism in Africa, Covid-19 governance, U.S. politics and election, Hong Kong politics, Politics in Latin America, Trump legal issues, Politics in Europe, Abortion rights in the U.S., Russia and Ukraine, Gun violence in the U.S., Gender inequality, Israel and Palestine, immigration and border crisis, Northeast Asia politics, Corporate legal challenges, Politics in the Middle East, Politics in India, and Women protests under Taliban. For the top topics, post accounts, the most frequent words associated with the topic, and the labels, see Table 1.

Table 1 Frequency of Posts on CGTN Democratic Topics with Illustrations

Topic Label	Post Count	Top Words	BERTopic Label
China’s foreign policy and geopolitics	8,262	'china', 'chinese', 'people', 'world', 'climate', 'national', 'biodiversity', 'global', 'international', 'beijing'	0_china_chinese_people_world
Political dynamism in Africa	4,964	'africa', 'congo', 'president', 'republic congo', 'democratic republic', 'democratic', 'democratic republic congo', 'republic', 'sudan', 'country'	2_africa_congo_president_republic congo
Covid-19 governance	4,034	'covid', 'police', 'people', 'protests', 'vaccine', 'floyd', 'health', 'black', 'new', 'protesters'	1_covid_police_people_protests
U.S. politics and election	2,902	'election', 'biden', 'president', 'presidential', 'joe', 'joe'	5_election_biden_president_presidential

		biden', 'trump', 'voting', 'state', 'vote'	
Hong Kong politics	1,903	'kong', 'hong', 'hong kong', 'hongkong', 'hk', 'hksar', 'administrative region', 'administrative', 'special administrative region', 'special administrative'	3_kong_hong_hong kong_hongkong
Politics in Latin America	1,887	'president', 'brazil', 'country', 'government', 'indigenous', 'bolsonaro', 'election', 'protests', 'peru', 'presidential'	4_president_brazil_country_government
Trump legal challenges	1,701	'trump', 'president', 'donald', 'donald trump', 'president donald trump', 'president donald', 'capitol', 'charges', 'court', 'election'	10_trump_president_ald_ald trump
Politics in Europe	1,486	'minister', 'prime', 'prime minister', 'uk', 'election', 'parliament', 'johnson', 'brexit', 'eu', 'boris'	7_minister_prime_prime minister_uk
Abortion rights in the U.S.	1,386	'abortion', 'court', 'supreme court', 'supreme', 'law', 'state', 'states', 'abortions', 'women', 'federal'	8_abortion_court_supreme court_supreme

Politics in Russia and Ukraine	1,200	'ukraine', 'russia', 'russian', 'ukrainian', 'president', 'military', 'moscow', 'conflict', 'war', 'kyiv'	6_ukraine_russia_russian_ukrainian
Gun violence in the U.S.	1,139	'gun', 'shooting', 'school', 'police', 'mass', 'killed', 'year', 'shootings', 'law', 'people'	13_gun_shooting_school_police
Gender inequality	1,018	'women', 'gender', 'world', 'equality', 'girls', 'rights', 'violence', 'international', 'un', 'men'	14_women_gender_world_equality
Politics in Israel and Palestine	945	'israel', 'israeli', 'palestinian', 'palestinians', 'netanyahu', 'minister', 'bank', 'prime minister', 'prime', 'jerusalem'	9_israel_israeli_palestinian_palestinians
Immigration and border crisis	908	'migrants', 'mexico', 'border', 'asylum', 'immigration', 'texas', 'mexi', 'people', 'new', 'state'	12_migrants_mexico_border_asylum
Politics in Asian countries	817	'korea', 'republic korea', 'dprk', 'republic', 'democratic people republic', 'democratic people republic korea',	11_korea_republic korea_dprk_republic

		'people republic korea', 'democratic people', 'people republic', 'democratic'	
Corporate legal challenges	742	'facebook', 'company', 'apple', 'app', 'media', 'social', 'google', 'rs', 'social media', 'data'	15_facebook_company_apple_app
Politics in the Middle East	714	'iran', 'saudi', 'iranian', 'syria', 'people', 'government', 'turkish', 'protests', 'death', 'al'	16_iran_saudi_iranian_syria
Politics in India	713	'india', 'indian', 'court', 'modi', 'government', 'state', 'minister', 'farmers', 'prime', 'delhi'	17_india_indian_court_modi
Women under Afghanistan Taliban	505	'afghanistan', 'taliban', 'women', 'afghan', 'kabul', 'country', 'government', 'afghans', 'rights', 'citizens'	18_afghanistan_taliban_women_afghan

The talk of democracy on the CGTN Facebook and Instagram platforms covered different regions, including the Chinese territories, East Asia and Southeast Asia, the United States, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin American countries. However, the CGTN has tailored the narrative of democracy for different countries. This study will dive into the details of topics, presenting how the CGTN social media platforms talked about democracy in China and Hong Kong, the Global North, the Global South, and also on global issues.

China and Hong Kong: Promoting China's institution and views on democracy

The topic with the largest portion of posts talks about China's institutional strength and China's view on democracy. The posts highlighted China's legislative sessions and promoted China's political system as "democracy". At the same time, the posts offered rebukes to the criticism, mostly from the Western countries, on China's human rights records, especially in Xinjiang. Also, the posts tended to promote China's views on democracy, advocating for divergent conceptions of democracy. For example, one post claimed that "Chinese President #XiJinping said on Tuesday that democracy is not a special right reserved for an individual country, but a right for the people of all countries to enjoy."² Another post quoted the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying that "democracy should not be U.S.-made Coca-Cola that tastes the same everywhere in the world"³ The posts showed that China acknowledged the universality of democracy but attempted to promote alternatives of the Western model of democracy.

Regarding Hong Kong politics, most of the CGTN social media posts highlighted the illegitimacy of Anti-Extradition Protests in 2019 and 2020. The posts portrayed the protesters as radicals aided by Western power, represented the protests as disruptions to social order, and defended the legitimacy of China's imposition of the National Security Law in restoring social stability. Also, the CGTN posts fought back against the U.S./West claims that China attempted to undermine freedoms and democracy in Hong Kong. Therefore, China's state-owned media platform CGTN connects democracy to chaos and instability, while the Chinese political institution offers a solution to restore order.

Global North: Institutional inefficiency, civil resistance, and legal challenges

² Please see the post at: <https://www.facebook.com/422898847759660/posts/4475128909203280>

³ Please see the post at: <https://www.facebook.com/300653326696613/posts/4220093258085914>

In the Global North, the talk of democracy in the CGTN media platforms is connected to inefficient political institutions characterized by civil resistance and legal challenges. The linkage of democracy to protests and disorder extends to the Global North, which focusing the United States. On the Topic of U.S. elections and politics, the CGTN posts around democracy focused on the disputes around the U.S. elections and congressional deadlocks, highlighting the public distrust of the U.S. democratic system. For example, one post reported that fewer voters had trust in the democratic process based on Gallup during the 2022 midterm elections. Another post reported that the Republican politicians pushed for laws to require ID for voting. Another post cast doubt on the legitimacy of the U.S. presidential election because the electoral college rather than the voters decides the president. Other posts focused on the partisan fighting in Congress on gun control and the government debt ceiling, highlighting the legislative deadlock and inefficiency in American democracy.

“Trump legal issues” is one of the topics related to U.S. democracy. The CGTN posts on this topic focused on the investigation into Trump’s alleged election interference in Georgia, the House investigation into the Capitol Hill riot, the House impeachment trials, and the criminal charges against the former president.

The topic of “Abortion rights” focused on the nationwide debate around women’s reproductive rights in the United States. While some CGTN’s posts highlighted the conservative states passing laws to restrict access to abortion, other posts emphasized the abortion rights activists holding protests and demonstrations, especially amid the U.S. Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. One post reported that the protesters held rallies at the home of Supreme Court Justices Brett Kavanaugh and John Roberts.

Gun ownership is another contested issue in the United States. The CGTN’s posts highlighted the social tension around the gun issue, portraying it as unsolvable in the U.S. democratic system. For example, one post reported that Texas’s new law allowed people to have guns in public without training and a permit, highlighting the legislative power of individual

states despite nationwide outrage. Another post covered that a local judge was shot dead at home in Wisconsin as part of the domestic terrorist attempts. Other posts covered multiple police shooting incidents, attempting to underline the weakness of the police system in the U.S.

On “Immigration and border crisis”, CGTN media platforms focused on the immigration crisis along the U.S.-Mexican borders, showcasing the inhumane side of the American immigration system. One post reported the Biden administration had to restore Trump’s border policy that made asylum seekers wait for court hearings within Mexican territories. Another post highlighted the Trump administration’s policy that separated children from parents at the borders. Other posts attempted to highlight the inability of the U.S. to prevent the influx of asylum seekers and secure its borders. For example, one post highlighted the urgency of the immigration issue when thousands of migrants took caravans toward the U.S.-Mexican borders.

Likewise, the topic of European politics highlighted the inefficiency of Western democracy in addressing policies. The CGTN posts focused on budget disputes in the Italian parliament and the deadlock around the Brexit deal in the British parliament. Other posts focused on the tension with the European Union. For example, the posts emphasized Brussels’ disputes with Poland over the country’s reform that would possibly undermine judicial independence, and with Hungary over its suppression of LGBTQ rights.

The “Politics in the Israel/Palestine” mainly focused on the Israeli social movement against Prime Minister Netanyahu, especially amid the governmental efforts to overhaul the country’s judicial system. One post reported that demonstrated blocked roads to protest the judicial reform that would allow the government to appoint the Supreme Court judges and to demand the restoration of balanced powers. Also, some CGTN posts emphasized the Palestinians’ protests against Israel’s efforts to set up military checkpoints in the West Bank, and urging Israel to end blockade at the Gaza borders. In sum, the CGTN posts appeared to indicate

that democratic institutions do not necessarily curb the government's efforts to expand power either at home or abroad.

Legal challenges of tech companies are another topic on CGTN's democratic messaging in the West, which highlights the failure of the Western democratic system in regulating tech companies. For example, one post reported that Facebook was urged by politicians to fight fake news in elections, and criticized by the U.S. lawmakers for allowing vaccine misinformation on the platform. Another post covered that Google and Amazon faced legal challenges in Europe for violating privacy laws and obtaining children's voices and geolocations. Overall, the CGTN tried to use examples of the big tech influence on politics, and tension between big tech companies and politicians to highlight the weakness in democratic governance.

"Politics in Russia and Ukraine" did not emphasize political violence. Instead, the topic focused on not only the Russia-Ukraine War but also the broader political dynamism in both countries. In Russia, the CGTN media platforms focused on presidential activities. For example, one post reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin granted citizenship to the residents of Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories. Another post covered Putin's efforts to change the Constitution to remain in power. The strong-man power centralization efforts contract with the democratic principle of leadership change and public accountability. Also, the CGTN posts gave spaces to the public resistance, covering anti-war protests and protests against the sentencing of the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny. In Ukraine, the CGTN posts centered on the anti-war narrative, highlighting worldwide dissent and solidarity, key elements of democratic expression. One post covered worldwide protests in solidarity with Ukraine during Russia's invasion. Several posts adopted the humanitarian frames to report on the war's impact on civilian lives in Ukraine., which underscored the protection of human rights, a core principle of democracy. Other posts reported on Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's efforts to lobby the Western countries, showing a leader's active engagement with democratic institutions like the British Parliament and the Munich Security Conference to rally global support.

Global South: Political violence and social disorder

The topics related to the Global South tended to represent political violence and democratic failure in developing countries. The CGTN posts around the topic “political dynamism in Africa” focused on the election chaos in African countries. For example, several CGTN posts followed the dynamism in civilian-police conflicts in Ethiopia following a disputed election. Another post reported that the Rwanda government had to deploy military forces to protect the general election. Other posts focused on the constitutional crisis in Mali, police-protester clashes in Sudan, and the attack on the EU election observers in Malawi. In short, the CGTN posts that the installed democratic institutions in African countries did not effectively function.

Likewise, the topic “Politics in Latin America” focused on political violence in Latin American countries. One post emphasized the clashes between police and anti-government protesters in Colombia. Other posts focused on the social crisis in Argentina, political unrest in Peru, election disputes in Venezuela and Guatemala, and land disputes between the Brazilian indigenous groups and the government. Overall, the CGTN perceived that democracy did not work in Latin American countries.

“Politics in the Middle East” also followed the pattern of framing violence. The CGTN posts focused on Iran and Iraq. In Iran, the posts mainly highlighted the violence amid the Iranian protests against the regime. For example, a post reported that Iranian security forces opened fire on demonstrators who mourned the death of the anti-hijab activist Mahsa Amini who died in morality police custody. Another post covered the clashes between protesters and the Iranian police amid nationwide demonstrations. Also, the CGTN reported that Iranian shops closed doors for fear of riots amid the nationwide protests on the death of Mahsa Amini. Besides, some posts also paid attention to political situations in neighboring countries. For

example, the Egyptian military court sentenced the suspect to death for church bombings. Saudi Arabia sentenced the suspect to death for killing Khashoggi.

The “Indian politics” was also characterized by violence. A post reported that the Indian police fired water cannons on protesters against its agricultural reform bills and arrested protesters who clashed with police. Another post claimed that the protests against India’s citizenship law were the worst violence in decades. Protests broke out after Indian police cremated the body of the gang rape victim. The land disputes concerning Indian Muslim majority neighborhoods over the eviction and demolition for railway construction. Also, the Indian Supreme Court legalized gay sex, ruling it no longer as a private offense. All in all, the CGTN posts are indicative of the failure of a democratic government to restore social order and protect rights.

“Women under Afghanistan Taliban” focused on the repressive Taliban government after it retook the country. For example, a post showed that journalists were beaten in custody for covering women protesting Taliban oppression. Another post reported that a university professor was arrested for giving free books in Kabul streets. Other posts highlighted the protests against the Taliban. One post showed that male students walked out of university to protest the exclusion of female classmates. Another post showed that women chanted slogans to protest the Taliban’s policy against women’s rights.

“Politics in Asian countries”, focusing on China’s neighboring countries, was not following the representation of political violence. The CGTN’s posts reported the North Korean military activities and the leader King Jung Un’s official schedule. The posts also highlighted the close ties between North Korea and China, covering the anniversary events of the Korean War, and the mutual visit between Xi Jinping and King Jung Un. The CGTN posts also paid attention to China’s democratic neighbors South Korea and Japan, focusing on the troubled governance. One CGTN post covered Japan’s challenges in hosting the Tokyo Olympics during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the country’s struggle to host a global sports event and manage a public

health crisis. In South Korea, the CGTN posts tended to underline the unpopularity of the United States and Japan, reporting people protesting against the country's joint military exercise with the U.S., and Japan's release of nuclear wastewater. Besides, to showcase China's closer ties with its neighbors, the CGTN posts reported Xi Jinping's congratulatory messages to leaders in, for example, Laos and Indonesia for winning elections.

Global issues: Efforts in the South, Challenges in the North

On global issues of "Gender inequality" and "Covid-19 governance", the CGTN's messaging tended to emphasize the governance efforts in the Global South and, on the contrary, challenges in the Global North.

CGTN's coverage of "Gender inequality" focused on governance efforts to address this issue, particularly in the Global South. For instance, the posts highlighted social groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo urging women to unite against social injustices, while Mozambique launched an economic empowerment plan to support rural women. Similar initiatives in Somalia, Morocco, and South Africa were also featured. The call for gender equality extended to the Global North, where CGTN highlighted the contributions of Black women to the civil rights movement in the United States. Conversely, some posts emphasized gender inequality in the European job market and the U.S. educational system, critiquing the Global North for not addressing these issues as effectively as the Global South.

Likewise, "Covid-19 governance" tended to highlight the efforts in the Global South and challenges in the Global North. The CGTN posts showed that democratic governments, either in the Global South or Global North, had to take restrictive measures. Some posts reported that the South African government had to adopt a policy of vaccine certificates and deprive unvaccinated people of public access service with government-led vaccination drives in Malawi and Nigeria. Senegal and Tunisia had to impose a Covid curfew despite protests. In the Global North, the posts emphasized the dilemma faced by the Western democracies in managing

the pandemic. Several posts emphasized the defiant anti-lockdown protesters confronting police in Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic. Also, one post reported the Covid death rates in different races in the United States, highlighting the racial differences.

Discussion and conclusion

The study's findings have significant implications for the discussion of China's ambitions in shaping global governance. Overall, CGTN's global information campaign on 'democracy' conveyed a negative connotation, often associating democracy with institutional inefficiency and social disorder. The Chinese government claimed to have institutional strength in efficient and effective governance. In other words, the authoritarian system has the execution power to pool resources to accomplish major initiatives (Xinhua, 2021). The portrayal of the democratic system as inefficient would make China's political institution more attractive.

The messaging of democracy in the CGTN showed different narrative strategies towards the Global North and the Global South. In the Global North, democracy was portrayed as synonymous with inefficiency, whereas in the Global South, it was linked to political violence. Notably, China's state-owned media platforms depicted the democratic conditions in the Global South as worse than those in the Global North. For example, in Africa and Latin America where the Chinese government aimed to build closer political and business ties, the talk of democracy was associated with the rampage of political violence and social disorder.

The strategy is explainable. Portraying the Global South as a troubled democracy shrouded in social problems leaves space for China to offer its solution. The messaging strategy aligns with Chinese President Xi Jinping's public remarks on the global landscape. Xi noted that "major changes unseen in a century" (Xi, 2022) have created an opportunity for "Chinese solutions" to serve as an alternative to Western-style market-oriented and democratic institutions (Xi, 2023). This analysis of CGTN's messaging strategies of <democracy> highlights another

aspect of China's ambition to expand its influence over global governance and international norms. The messaging strategy supplements China's discursive competition with the United States in digital diplomacy focusing on Africa (Repnikova & Chen, 2023), China's contestation of statehood practices (Chen et al., 2023), and China's challenge to the Western media standards (El Damanhoury et al., 2024), which are collectively considered as promoting the "Chinese solution" or "Chinese norms".

Meanwhile, on global issues, the CGTN appeared to stand with the Global South. The messaging of the media platforms aimed to promote the idea of effective governance in the Global South while highlighting the challenges and troubled governance in the Global North. By emphasizing the efficiency and success of the Global South and the difficulties faced by the Global North, the CGTN apparently sought to reinforce the idea that alternative governance models, especially those advocated by China, can be more effective in addressing global issues in different regions. This approach would not only bolster China's image as a "problem-solver" among developing nations but also subtly critique the Western governance model, positioning them as less effective in certain global landscapes.

CGTN's coverage of civil resistance, an element of democratic societies, is particularly noticeable. The strategy may have dual purposes. On the one hand, the media platform tended to emphasize the widespread distrust and discontent among the public towards the democratic system, highlighting the institutional failures. On the other hand, the media platform occasionally aligns itself with core democratic values, presenting itself in a progressive light occasionally siding with core democratic values to gain broader acceptance from the global audience despite its authoritarian state-backed origins.

The limitations of this study open multiple potential avenues for future scholarship. First, the reception of the CGTN's messaging of democracy is beyond the scope of this study. The scholars should continue to dive into the question of whether, how, and to what extent the

CGTN's messaging strategies resonate with global audiences. Second, this study grouped CGTN's English-language accounts on Facebook and Instagram for analysis, while not paying attention to inter-platform and intra-platform strategic nuances. Future studies should explore CGTN's possible different messaging strategies between Facebook and Instagram, and among different regional accounts.

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Appendix 1: Democracy search words

Language	Terms
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English	Democracy, democratic, institution, election, elections, voting, voter, voters, constitution, constitutional, civil rights, freedom, freedoms, rule of law, governance, human rights, accountability, accountable, participation, justice, court, law, transparent, transparency, empowerment, empower, rights, diversity, inclusiveness, consensus, protest, demonstration, equality, equal, governance, citizen, citizenship, majority, minority, constituency, constitutents, activist, activism, activists, pluralism, legislature, judicial, judge, liberty, liberties, parliament, protester, protesters, legislation, advocacy, advocate
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