Picturing a journey of protest or a journey of harmony? Comparing the visual framing of the 2008 Olympic torch relay in the US versus the Chinese press

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Abstract
In examining details of the international journey of the 2008 Olympic torch relay in the US and Chinese press, results revealed that US photos emphasized the protest frame by showing unsupported visuals of the torch relay and focusing on human rights/Tibetan independence. The Chinese dailies, on the other hand, emphasized the success of the torch relay while focusing on the harmony frame. These frames reflected each country’s news and societal values regarding the conflict under study, its policy towards Tibet, and its level of support for the Olympics in Beijing. In addition to these findings, the authors propose a framework of visual–textual consistency to access the relationship between visual and textual information. Therefore, this study not only adds to the body of work in visual communication by exploring the visual coverage of a controversial Olympic event in a cross-cultural context, offering a broader understanding of the intertwined relationship between media, conflict, and sports, but also contributes to framing theory by examining captions that build contrasting visual frames within a conflict setting.

Keywords
Chinese press, conflict, Olympics, Tibet, torch relay, visual framing

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The Olympics have a long history of being intertwined with politics (Triesman, 1984). Young (2004: 169) states that as ‘one of the most important and revered of all Olympic institutions’, the Olympic torch relay’s domestic and international influences have constantly been appropriated by various groups of societies to voice their agendas and attract media coverage.

Instead of a journey of harmony as the Chinese government had planned it to be (Gries, 2009), in March and April 2008, the international portion of the Beijing Olympics torch relay became a major public relations disaster for the Chinese government (Becker, 2011), receiving an unprecedented scale of protests and disruption (Black, 2008). The event not only created an international media war in which the Chinese and Western media focused on different aspects of the relay (Elegant and Ramzy, 2008), but also had an impact on the torch relay for future Olympic games.

Starting from Olympia in Greece, the international journey of the 2008 Olympic torch relay was the largest one in Olympic history. After being briefly interrupted in Greece by an activist affiliated with Reporters Without Borders, the torch lighting ceremony then faced major protests in London, Paris, and India (Edney, 2008), among other regions. In London, the dramatic scenes of the conflict showing protestors attempting to extinguish the flame with a fire extinguisher and grab the torch caught immediate international media attention (Taylor, 2008). In San Francisco, pro-Tibetan activists hung a giant banner on the Golden Gate Bridge, which became another international media spectacle (‘Torch relay in San Francisco draws massive protest’, 2008). However, when the torch proceeded to South America, Africa and Western Asian, no disruption was reported. Therefore, in reporting conflict scenes related to the international journey of the torch relay in 2008, news outlets could have focused on a conflict aspect of the relay, i.e. emphasizing the clashes between protesters and police, between protesters and torch bearers, and/or the confrontation between supporters of the Chinese government and supporters of Tibetan independence; on the other hand, news outlets could have focused on a harmony frame, i.e. emphasizing that the torch was welcomed by people in many parts of the world before reaching its final destination in China.

This study therefore investigates this conflict setting by examining the photographic reporting of the international journey of the 2008 Olympic torch relay in Chinese and US dailies. Particular attention was paid to both visual symbols and textual information related to human rights, Tibetan independence and whether the photos reflected harmony or protest frames.

The contribution of the current study is threefold. First, it offers a unique opportunity to examine whether US and Chinese newspapers, operating in substantially different media systems competed with or supported their governments’ stands towards this controversial Olympic event from a visual reporting perspective. By comparing visual framing of an international event affiliated with two cultures/countries, the critical choices made by visual journalists are explored (see Fahmy, 2010; Fahmy and Kim, 2008).

Second, mega sporting events have been utilized by governments and political groups to advance their different agendas and create media spectacles, by peaceful or non-peaceful means (i.e. the Marathon bombing in Boston in 2013). By comparing the manifestations of the torch relay (a venue to promote peace vs conflict) with newspaper
coverage in two countries, this study yields further insight into the intertwined relationship between media, conflict, and sports.

Third, in comparing the visual content of each image portraying the event and the accompanying caption using the concept of visual–textual consistency, this study presents a new analytical framework for future visual framing studies.

While past literature has explored images in relation to the related textual information (see Graber, 1990; Hall, 1973; Paivio et al., 1968; Zillmann et al., 1999), the visual–textual relationship within the theoretical framework of framing in a conflict setting is yet to be explored quantitatively. That is to say, since visual and verbal framing work in different fashions (see Messaris and Abraham, 2001), when captions and photos are examined separately in the media, they might produce different frames or the same frame in different frequencies.

In the following sections, we will lay out the dual nature of sports throughout history and in the Olympic torch relay in 2008 specifically – while most sporting events set out to promote good will, they often became the stage of conflict. This research seeks to understand how the Chinese and US dailies reported the torch relay in the coexistence of conflict and harmony frames.

**Sports as peacemaker and promoter of a harmonious society**

Sports and games have complex relations with international relations. Xu (2006: 91) argued that contemporary sports are integrated into international state systems and represent the ‘continuation of politics by other means’. Triesman (1984: 17) also contended that ‘sports contain all the manifestations of politics’, specifically the Olympic games.

Nation states have used sports to build a good relationship with another country and to contain domestic problems (Bairner, 2008). In the early 1970s, for example, the Ping Pong Diplomacy helped normalize China’s relation with the United States (Xu, 2008), and the China–Japan Supermatches in the mid 1980s similarly helped strengthened the ‘friendship’ between China and Japan. The recent rapid economic growth of China widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and fueled social instability. In response, state leaders have been promoting the idea of building a harmonious society (Fan, 2006). Therefore, it can be argued that there was an intentional promotion of national pride through the hosting of the Olympic games to help bridge different groups in the Chinese society.

**The Olympic games: Sites for protests and media spectacles**

Sports have long been intertwined with international conflicts. As Tomlinson and Whannel (1984: i) put it, the Olympics has been a site for expressing ‘all shades of political opinion’. Since 1896, the modern Olympic games have been a constant site for boycotts and/or public protests (Hill, 1992).
For example, in the history of the Olympics, the host countries’ domestic dissidents protested against their governments in the 1968 Mexico Games, the 1988 Soul Games (Ong, 2004) and the 2000 Sydney Games (Elder et al., 2006). The Olympics also intensified international tension, from the massacre of Israeli athletes in 1972, to the boycotts in the 1976, 1980 and 1984 games (Young, 2008). As Whannel (2008: 32) noted, once sports became a spectacle through the mass media, especially through television, dissidents ‘exploited the prominence of sport to make a political point’.

In the case of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the protests against the torch relay were planned in advance with the help of a major Western public relations firm (Becker, 2011) – mostly triggered by Tibetan unrest. Various rights groups with a wide range of agendas had long planned to stage protests surrounding the event to maximize media exposure, including Students for a Free Tibet, Reporters Without Borders (Edney, 2008), the Falung Gong activists, the Olympic Watch (Naim, 2007), and In Defense of Animals (McKinley, 2008). The large scale of protests was in tension with the news value of harmony long held by the Chinese press, which is arguably rooted in the Confucius tradition (Yin, 2008).

The road to the Olympic torch relay: Tradition and symbolism

The Olympic torch relay is a modern invention that has little to do with ancient Greece. The burning flame in an Olympic stadium was first introduced in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games. The torch relay tradition per se is attributed to the controversial 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Despite the Nazi overtone in the 1936 Olympics, the torch relay as an Olympic ritual was instigated and followed since.

The torch relay’s controversial origin and the protests – at times violent – against it in 2008 are in sharp contrast with the official promotion of the relay. According to the International Olympic Committee, the torch relay is intended to herald ‘upcoming Olympic Games and transmits a message of peace and friendship amongst peoples’ along the route (‘The Olympic flame’, 2007: 2). The sun-ignited flame in the torch lighting ceremony symbolizes its purity. Thus, the promotion of the relay as a journey of harmony, and the referral to the Olympic flame as a sacred flame in Chinese society, are consistent with current Olympic traditions and the official claims of the IOC.

Framing of news events

Generally speaking, framing represents ‘patterns … of presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion’ (Gitlin, 1980: 7). To frame is

to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993: 52)

It reduces possible meanings into limited, conventional categories (Tuchman, 1978).
Numerous comparative framing analyses related to conflict and/or crisis of international events have been conducted. Many examined and compared coverage by Chinese and international media, including studies that looked at the debate between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands (Ostini and Fung, 2002), the NATO air strikes on Kosovo (Yang, 2003), the 2001 Spy Plane Crisis (Hook and Pu, 2006), the SARS pandemic (Luther and Zhou, 2005), and HIV/AIDS in China (Wu, 2006). Overall, these studies concluded that the dominant frames in the media reflected distinct societal values and governments’ policies towards these issues.

Increasingly, scholars have noted the power of visuals in the news. While a review of the literature shows no explicit definition of visual framing, the process itself involves the selective prioritization of some images to promote a specific interpretation of events conducted either consciously or subconsciously. It is therefore instructive to reflect on how media apply visual framing to contribute to our understanding of the world we see in the news. Past literature indicates that visual framing is achieved through both form and content of photos in a number of ways: The sheer number of photos covering a particular issue or event which reflects the relative importance a news outlet places on that event (frequency); the selection or exclusion of persons or objects present in the photos; the way persons or objects are presented in the frame (e.g. relative size, camera angle); and the related textual information (e.g. caption; affiliated story).

**Visual/textual information in a conflict setting**

Scholars in many disciplines have examined images in relation to the related textual information (e.g. Graber, 1990; Hall, 1973; Paivio et al., 1968; Zillmann et al., 1999). The image superiority effect states that, when concepts are presented as pictures and words, they receive better recall when shown as images than as words (Paivio, 1986; Paivio et al., 1968). In the study of TV news, visual themes were also found to have a better recall than verbal themes (Graber, 1990). In general these studies found that, when images and words communicate the same meaning, images are recalled better.

To a much lesser extent, scholars explored when images and words communicate dissimilar meanings, or when the denoted meanings of images are subject to different interpretations, how audience members process the overall meaning conveyed by combining visual and verbal information. Comparing visual with verbal framing, Messaris and Abraham (2001: 218) noted that because of ‘images’ lack of an explicit propositional syntax, (implicit) propositions made by images may be less controversial than verbal framing. On the other hand, it can be argued that the opposite is also true: images, especially those related to violence, crime, and poverty are much more powerful in stirring up strong emotions in the public than when the same information is communicated verbally (Sharkey, 1993). In *The Determinations of News Photographs*, Hall (1973) demonstrated that similar close-ups of Maudling (a UK government minister) were interpreted differently by different British newspapers through their different captions. Graber (1990) also noted that TV news viewers largely rely on verbal information for overall meaning since images alone may be subject to a variety of interpretations (using an example of a person running along a city street).
In sum, previous literature found that textual information is an important contextual element to help determine the visual frame (e.g. Griffin and Lee, 1995); however, no quantitative analytical study has directly examined the relationship between the visual and the corresponding textual information in a conflict setting, and whether the frame they co-produce is different from the frame produced by visual information alone. In this study, we propose the concept of visual–textual consistency to measure whether the visual information in news photos is consistent with the accompanying verbal information within a framing context.

**Research questions and hypotheses**

Cultural and societal values have been gaining attention in comparative studies of journalism (Kim and Kelly, 2007; Yin, 2008). In particular, the value of harmony and control of negative news have had a significant influence on reporting in China (Yin, 2008). When reporting events related to national identity and international image, Chinese media are normally dominated by positive news.

On the other hand, conflict has been an important news value in reporting both domestic and international news in the United States. The US reporting of international news has often been criticized in terms of narrow themes, most of which have been negative. In particular, when reporting foreign political conflict and protest in the United States, they ‘must be more dramatic and usually more violent than their domestic equivalents to break into the news’ (Gans, 1979: 35). Based on the above we predicted that the Chinese and US news photos would portray the torch relay outcome/reception differently.

**H1:** In covering the conflict related to the 2008 Olympic torch relay, Chinese news photos would focus on a harmony frame (i.e. emphasizing the success of the torch relay), while US news photos would focus on a protest frame (i.e. emphasizing the disruptions and protests against it; and emphasizing the overall unsuccessful relay event).

Scholars have noted that news images may not be consistent with the accompanying verbal or textual information. For example, in a study of war images, Griffin and Lee (1995) pointed out that, although the texts may be talking about the actual combat, the photos could have been file photos showing soldiers engaged in combat training. In an analysis of news coverage of the Beijing Spring in 1989, Friedland and Zhong (1996) noted that, while CBS showed images of students holding signs proclaiming the end of government corruption, and singing the *Internationale* (the anthem of international communism and symbol of patriotism), these visuals were still framed as a pro-democratic/anti-communism movement by the CBS reporters. To examine how textual information contributes to visual framing in the conflict under study, we examined the captions and the photos separately, posing the following two research questions:

**RQ1:** In covering the conflict related to the reception of the 2008 Olympic torch relay, to what extent did (a) the images and (b) the captions in Chinese and US dailies show different frames (harmony vs protest frames)?
Gans (1979: 31) observed that in the US, foreign news – especially news covering communist countries – is characterized by ‘explicit value judgments’, which would not be deemed appropriate for coverage of a domestic issue. Studies of news coverage related to US foreign policy showed that US media’s reporting often reflects the government’s positions and perceptions of a particular issue (e.g. Entman, 1991; Hook and Pu, 2006; Yang, 2003). When reporting China-related issues, for example, the US media often employ anti-Chinese government frames that suggest conflict, repression and human rights abuse (Wu, 2006). Thus, in the event under study, because of the US government’s support for Tibetan independence and human rights, we predicted the following:

**H2:** In covering the conflict related to the 2008 Olympic torch relay, the photos in US dailies would be more likely to emphasize a human rights/Tibetan independence perspective (i.e. emphasizing the Tibetan flag/spiritual leader/Tibetan Buddhist monk, a human rights spokesperson, and/or symbols and protest signs from a human rights group) than photos in Chinese dailies would.

Again, in order to examine how visual and textual information contributed to the human rights/Tibetan independence frame, we asked the following two research questions.

**RQ2:** In covering the conflict related to the 2008 Olympic torch relay, to what extent did (a) the images and (b) the captions in Chinese and US dailies use symbols or texts related to human rights and Tibetan independence?

Communication scholars have attempted to measure objectivity in news photos, approaching it from different angles, including naturalism, balanced coverage, factual representation, and on-the-scene versus file photo (Brecheen-Kirkton, 1991; Griffin and Lee, 1995; Woo, 1994). The notion of objectivity reflects the emergence of journalism as a profession (Schudson, 1978), and originated from the positivistic paradigm. As an evolving concept, journalistic objectivity has been discussed in terms of neutrality, detachment, and ‘facts’, and many critics questioned whether objectivity is an attainable standard (Boudana, 2011). In this study, we suggested using visual–textual consistency to measure news photos’ relative objectivity. In other words, in this conflict setting, we examine the extent to which a photo’s visual content is matched by what is indicated in the caption (how true the caption is to the image). We posed the following research question:

**RQ3:** In reporting the 2008 Olympic torch relay, what is the difference in visual–textual consistency between photos that ran in Chinese dailies versus the ones that ran in US dailies?

**Method**

To examine the conflict related to the visual coverage of the international portion of the 2008 Olympic torch relay, we content-analyzed photos that ran from 19 March to 4 May
2008 in four US and four Chinese dailies — covering the entire time frame of the torch relay event.¹

The US newspapers comprised The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune and The Los Angeles Times. They were selected for their wide circulation, their national and international influence, as well as their wide range of national and international coverage. For the Chinese newspapers, we examined People’s Daily, Xinmin Evening News, Guangzhou Daily and Yangtze Evening News. These Chinese papers were selected based on their wide circulation, geographic representation and diversity of operating models.²

In terms of coding, the units of analysis were the individual news photographs and their accompanying captions. Every photograph depicting the 2008 Olympic torch relay was measured according to the following seven categories:

**Harmony/protest—visual**

Each photo was coded as harmony, protest or other. To be coded as harmony, a photograph had to show the welcoming of the torch relay process without interruption. To be coded as protest, a photograph had to portray the interruptions of the torch relay process and/or protests. Photographs that did not fit into these two categories, such as file photos of a torch relay bearer, were coded as other.

**Harmony/protest—textual**

In this case, each caption was measured in terms of harmony, protest or other. To be coded as harmony, a caption used words to suggest the welcoming of the torch relay process without interruption. To be coded as protest, a caption used words to suggest the interruption of the torch relay process and/or protests. Captions that did not fit into these two categories, such as captions that did not contain information directly related to the torch relay process, were coded as other.

**Harmony/protest—combined**

The combination of both textual and visual information in each photo was measured in terms of harmony, protest and other. To be coded as harmony, either the photo or the caption were coded as harmony, and the other one (photo or caption) was coded as other; or both photo and caption were coded as harmony. To be coded as protest, either the photo, the caption, or both were coded as protest. Other was assigned when neither the photo nor the caption fell into the previous two categories.

**Human rights/Tibetan independence—visual**

Each photo was coded for the presence or absence of this variable. To be coded as present the image needed to show the Tibetan flag, a Tibetan spiritual leader, a human rights spokesperson, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, and/or symbols and protest signs from a human rights group.
Human rights/Tibetan independence–textual

Each caption was coded for the presence or absence of this variable. To be coded as present, a caption used words related to human rights, Tibetan independence, and/or criticism of the Chinese government.

Human rights/Tibetan independence–combined

The combination of both textual and visual information in each photo was measured in terms of presence or absence of this variable. To be coded as present, either the photo or the caption, or both were coded as present.

Visual–textual consistency

This variable was coded based on whether the caption matched the content of the image regarding the harmony and protest frames. Each photo was coded as consistent, suggestive or opposite. To be coded as consistent, both the image and caption showed a harmony frame, both showed a protest frame or both fell into the other category. To be coded as suggestive, either the image or the caption were coded as harmony or protest, and the other one (image or caption) was coded as other (including harmony–other, protest–other, other–harmony, and other–protest). Opposite was assigned when the image and caption provided opposite information (harmony–protest; protest–harmony). Examples included images showing a torch bearer running through cheering crowds without protesters, and/or images with captions stating that the torch relay was disrupted.

The first author coded all 357 photos included in the data set. A second coder coded about 10 percent (36 images). Using Cohen’s Kappa, intercoder reliability was as follows: .91 for harmony/protest–visual, .86 for harmony/protest–textual, .86 for harmony/protest–combined, .77 for human rights/Tibetan independence–textual, .89 for human rights/Tibetan independence–combined, .77 for visual–textual consistency, and 1.00 for human rights/Tibetan independence–visual.

Results

A total of 272 photographs from Chinese newspapers and 85 photographs from US newspapers were analyzed. The US dailies ran fewer than one-third of the number of photographs than the Chinese dailies did, which may reflect the relative importance each country gave to the torch relay event. On the other hand, since China was the host country of the 2008 games, the reason why Chinese dailies carried more news photos can be explained by the news value of proximity.

H1 predicted that in visually reporting the conflict related to the 2008 Olympic torch relay, photos in Chinese dailies would focus on a harmony frame while photos in US dailies would focus on a protest frame. As shown in Table 1, a chi-square analysis examining the combination of textual and visual information suggested significant differences ($\chi^2 = 147.5$, df = 2, $p < .001$). There were significantly more photos in Chinese dailies...
showing a harmony frame (portraying the success of the event) than photos in US dailies and vice versa. These findings thus support \( H1 \).

Regarding the extent to which images (with no consideration to captions) in Chinese and US dailies showed different frames related to harmony/protest (\( RQ1a \)), as Table 2 indicates, there were significant differences (\( \chi^2 = 85.55, \text{df} = 2, p < .001 \)). When each category was examined separately, results showed the Chinese dailies portrayed the torch relay as significantly more successful than US dailies did. Findings also showed US dailies significantly portrayed the outcome as more unsuccessful than Chinese dailies did. Similarly, when the captions (with no consideration to visual content) in Chinese and US dailies were examined, (\( RQ1b \)), as shown in Table 3, there were significant differences (\( \chi^2 = 157.5, \text{df} = 2, p < .001 \)). The breakdown among the three categories suggested similar findings. The US dailies showed a significantly higher proportion of captions...
indicating a protest frame than the captions employed in Chinese dailies. By the same token, captions in Chinese dailies showed a higher proportion of a harmony frame than captions in US dailies did.

H2 predicted that the photos in US dailies would be more likely to emphasize a human rights/Tibetan independence perspective than photos in Chinese dailies would. Results of a chi-square analysis examining the combination of both textual and visual information suggested significant differences ($\chi^2 = 120.60$, df = 1, $p < .001$). This finding then supports H2.

When visual and textual information were examined separately (RQ2a and RQ2b), as shown in Table 4, the photos and captions in Chinese dailies were significantly less likely to emphasize a human rights/Tibetan independence perspective than photos and captions that ran in US newspapers.

RQ3 asked about the difference in visual–textual consistency between photos that ran in Chinese dailies versus the ones in US dailies. As shown in Table 5, after collapsing opposite and suggestive categories – to maintain reasonable cell sizes – results of a chi-square test showed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 50.153$, df = 1, $p < .001$). Findings suggest that captions that ran in Chinese dailies were more likely than captions that ran in US dailies to match the content of accompanying images. The US dailies, on the other hand, were significantly more likely than Chinese newspapers to run captions that provided information that was different from the accompanying images.

**Discussion**

Sporting events act as a double-edged sword, being capable of promoting peace and harmony, yet triggering conflict at the same time. Although promoting a political cause...
through the stage of sports attracts maximum media attention, different media may choose different aspects to report, thus limiting the impact. While the Chinese government set out to take advantage of the former aspect of sports, dissidents of the Chinese government, especially supporters of Tibetan independence took advantage of the latter, interrupting the torch relay in several major cities along its route. Findings here showed that the Chinese press visually reported the torch relay event as promoting harmony and the US press did not hesitate to visually report the event in terms of protests. Clearly, in this conflict setting, the Chinese and US media coverage reflected each country’s policy towards Tibet, news value and societal norms (encompassing cultural and political dimensions).

Conflict has been an important news value in the Western press (including the US press), especially in reporting international news. Scholarly writings indicate that, contrary to the promoted Olympic values of excellence, friendship and respect, Western media’s coverage of the Olympic games has always been associated with conflict, power abuse, and politics (see Real et al., 1989; Zaharopoulos, 2007). In addition, the US government has been sympathetic towards various human rights groups and the cause of Tibetan independence; coverage of their protests would highlight their cause.

On the other hand, although the Chinese press has undergone significant commercialization in recent years, news related to national unity is still tightly controlled by the Communist Party. Since the protests are largely condemning China’s official policy towards Tibet; reporting the protests will likely bring the Tibetan issue to the public’s attention, thereby stirring further unrest from the Tibetan region. In addition, culturally influenced by Confucius doctrines and being collectively orientated, Chinese society values the authority of group (state and family). Protests against the torch relay challenged the nationalist pride the Chinese government has been promoting, and potentially delegitimize the authority of the government. In addition, China has learned the lesson that political turmoil (e.g. the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square Movement) can hinder its economic and social development; downplaying the conflicts also functions as a mechanism for maintaining social stability.

In order to examine the role of captions in the visual framing process, we proposed the framework of visual–textual consistency to study images in building contrasting visual frames within a conflict setting. Since visual framing is the combined result of both visual and related textual information, the separate examination of visual content and related captions yielded additional insight in to the visual framing analysis under study. We argue that the explicit meaning produced by a photo alone can sometimes contradict the meaning produced by the combination of both the visual content and caption, especially when captions suggest contradictory information or the visual is subject to multiple interpretations. Since images and words differ in their possession of explicit propositional syntax, when their meaning is contested, verbal information tends to direct viewers on the interpretation of visuals (Hall, 1973).

In this study, for example, US dailies were significantly more likely than Chinese newspapers to run captions that provided information different from the visual content in images. In addition to visuals of protests in US dailies, captions were sometimes used to imply the protests against the torch relay even when visuals did not. Therefore, we argue that captions have the potential to play a crucial role in portraying events with
oppositional parties: conflict can be implied with an image that does not directly show confrontation, thus making visual framing more subtle than verbal framing alone.

In using this framework of visual–textual consistency to examine whether a photo showed a harmony frame or a conflict frame, we found US dailies were more likely to be inconsistent than Chinese ones. This can be explained by the more interpretative approach that US journalism has been taking. Schudson (1978) observed that US journalism has become more interpretative since the 1930s. Other authors also noted that US news photos were more interpretative while Korean photos were more informative (see Kim and Kelly, 2008). Since China shares cultural proximity with South Korea, the more straightforward explanation of the image in the Chinese captions we examined can be explained by the relative similarity in cultural background.

The complicated relationship between media, conflict, and sports has been discussed by scholars in various disciplines; this study extends this discussion by investigating the visual coverage of the 2008 Olympic torch relay in the media of two of the world’s major political powers. Although we analyzed a variety of newspapers, we do not intend to generalize our findings to other media in China and the United States. However, these newspapers’ contrasting visual definitions of the event (a journey of harmony versus a journey of protests and conflict) did reveal that images of these intertwined relationships are never innocent documentation of the real world, but are the results of different values and political views. By analyzing visuals and captions separately, and proposing the concept of textual–visual consistency, this study also enriched the field of visual communication. We hope future comparative research will continue to examine how contextual information contributes to the overall visual framing process of news reporting in conflict settings and beyond.

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**Notes**

1. The international portion of the torch relay ran from 22 March to 1 May 2008.
2. According to the World Association of Newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* ranked third, fourth, and seventh in circulation in the US in 2008. The largest circulated newspaper, *USA Today* was excluded because of its focus on domestic issues. The second widely circulated newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal* was excluded because it mainly covers economic and business issues. The fifth ranked newspaper, *The New York Daily News* was excluded because of its focus on New York City coverage; the sixth widely circulated newspaper, *The New York Post*, was excluded because it focuses on New York City and sports. *The Chicago Tribune* was selected because it is the largest newspaper based in the Middle West, and ranked ninth in circulation in the United States in 2010 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation.

In China, *People’s Daily* is the official party newspaper. *Yangtse Evening Post* is published in Nanjing, the second largest metropolitan region in the eastern part of China after Shanghai. *Guangzhou Daily* is published in the largest city in Southern China, Guangzhou. *Xinmin Evening News* is the most popular metropolitan newspaper in Shanghai. According to the World Association of Newspapers, *People’s Daily, Yangtse Evening Post* and *Guangzhou Daily*...
Daily ranked second, third and fourth in circulation in China. The most widely circulated newspaper, Reference News was excluded due to the fact that it carries very few news photos. Xinmin Evening News ranked 12th in circulation. It was selected because it is the most popular newspaper in Shanghai, the largest city in China.

3. Note that, in order to maintain reasonable cell sizes, the ‘suggestive’ and ‘opposite’ categories were later collapsed into one category.

4. We tested the difference between the four newspapers in the US sample against each research question and hypothesis, and only found a difference for RQ2b (human rights/Tibet independence–textual), with The New York Times being less likely to use human rights/Tibet independence related texts in the captions.

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