

Montevideo Convention and CGTN: Defining Statehood for Global Outreach

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State-based global media efforts are rapidly expanding and have attracted a wide audience reach. Instagram, a rapidly growing photo- and video-sharing platform, however, remains understudied. To fill the gap, this study examines the audience-targeting strategies of CGTN (China Global Television Network) Instagram account about the United Nations' institutional definition of statehood: territorial control, population control, governance, and capacity for alliances. Using topic modeling, this study reveals that CGTN Instagram, by intention or happenstance, promotes China's relative institutional strength in relation to other countries through its targeted use of statehood-based posts across different languages. The study discusses a comparison of the divergent strategies of CGTN and RT statehood posts. Whereas RT adopts more aggressive rhetoric to showcase its military might and undermine the institutional legitimacy of rival states, CGTN adopts more celebratory means to expand its influence and promote its institutional successes. This study expands understanding of China's global media operations, China-Russia comparative information strategy, and audience interaction on social media.

Keywords: CGTN, Instagram, statehood, audience targeting

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China and Russia now sponsor state-owned media corporations to undermine dominant Western media discourses and boost their international standings. They seek to challenge the supremacy of the United States in digital, technological, and cyberspace governance (Kolozaridi & Muravyov, 2021; Zeng, Stevens, & Chen, 2017), influence global audiences (Conley et al., 2020), and use cyber operations to influence target audiences online (Anderson, 2020).

By 2017, the Chinese government had rebranded the English-language channel of its China Central Television into an international division named China Global Television Network (CGTN). It delivers online channels in five languages (English, Spanish, France, Arabic, and Russian), and claims to reach audiences in more than 160 countries. It boasts more than 150 million followers and subscribers on its mobile applications and social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo (CGTN, 2016).

The expanding research on CGTN evaluates the network's broader strategy of China's public diplomacy (Li & Wu, 2018; Lu, 2018; Zhu, 2022), the impact of China's media expansion in the Global South (Guyo & Yu, 2022; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022; Sule, 2018; Wasserman, 2018), and the methods CGTN uses to counter Western narratives (Alpermann & Malzer, 2023; Colley & Moore, 2022; Morales, 2022; Yan, Tang, & Liu, 2022). Scholars insist that CGTN promotes pro-Beijing narratives on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2020) and Facebook (Liang, 2019), and rarely engages with local African audiences either on Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook (Madrid-Morales, 2017). Some scholars compare the content strategies of CGTN with foreign media outlets (Zhang & Ong'ong'a, 2022), while others focus on specific channels, such as CGTN Español (Ye & Albornoz, 2018) and CGTN Documentary (Zhu, 2022).

CGTN's Instagram posts, however, remain understudied, which is unfortunate as the platform is one of the largest social media platforms for photo- and video-sharing with 1.28 billion users as of 2022 (Statista, 2022). This study helps fill the gap by conducting an audience-targeting study of CGTN's Instagram. Specifically, it asks how China's CGTN multilingual Instagram accounts leverage the institutional definition of statehood to influence global audiences. In short, it examines if and how statehood topics are covered in the CGTN Instagram accounts and if and how they vary by language-targeted account.

The United Nations' definitional characteristics of statehood—territorial control, population control, governance, and capacity to establish state alliances—have served as a key starting point for developing international criteria for recognized statehood since the 1933 Organization of American States' Montevideo Convention. The importance of institutional definitions exists because "the power to persuade is, in large measure, the power to define" (Zarefsky, 2005, p. 1). Definitions sustain political meanings that are "empowered through persuasion or coercion" (Schiappa, 2003, p. 69).

Yet, the application of Montevideo criteria of statehood by the international community remains in flux. Some political entities meet the Montevideo criteria to qualify as states but are not recognized by other states in the international community; other entities widely recognized as failing to meet the qualifications maintain international standing as states (Warbrick, 2003). Constitutive scholars consider recognition by established states as more important than a positivist interpretations of the criteria because of (1) the range of terminological interpretations available for statehood, (2) the Montevideo criteria's focus on the creation rather the continuation of statehood, and (3) the position of territorial, population control, and governance

function as prerequisites to statehood, while the capacity to establish state alliances is a consequences of achieving the other three conditions (Zadeh, 2011).

Despite these disagreements scholars caution against abandoning the classical Montevideo criteria of statehood, arguing that these standards continue to function as “initial and basic normative requirements” for assessments of statehood (Okosa, 2018, p. 108). Crawford (2006) insists that to qualify as effective states, political entities should have effective control over their territories, populations, governance, and operative relations with other states. From such a perspective, statehood derives from the effective functioning of institutions within states. Further, the lack of consensus has not prevented nonstate actors and states alike from deploying global outreach messaging strategies focused on the institutional definitions of statehood to downplay their enemies and enhance their international standing (El Damanhoury, 2019; Winkler & El Damanhoury, 2022; Winkler, Massignan, Yachin, & McMinnimy, 2022).

This study aims to assess whether and to what extent the CGTN Instagram posts are aligned with the institutional criteria of statehood. As language functions as cultural symbols tailored to the “consumption habits, tastes, and preferences” of target audiences (Zhu, 2022, p. 678), this study asks if and how CGTN Instagram’s multilingual accounts showcase and promote China’s institutional success compared with other countries, especially Western democracies, in terms of four institutional components of statehood.

If the statehood criteria are repeated frequently (intentionally or not) to target viewers, the use of the persuasive strategy could be influencing global audiences in ways that might change perceptions of the international order. For example, if CGTN repeats narratives about the available land in Africa to address territorial control and simultaneously discusses its effective agricultural policies to bolster perceptions of its governance strategies, the two apparently distinctive narratives might be bolstering a revised, evaluative framework of effective, recognized states. In short, the lens of statehood may function as an organizing framework that could prove useful for evaluating CGTN narratives and yielding appropriate responses to China’s promotion of its interests vis-à-vis its competitors.

Method

We analyzed 11,359 posts appearing on CGTN’s Instagram accounts between September 2021 and September 2022. The posts, gathered via CrowdTangle (a public insight tool owned and operated by Meta), between September 2021 and September 2022. These posts appeared on the flagship account CGTN (n.d.), CGTN Africa (n.d.), CGTN America (n.d.), CGTN Arabic (n.d.), CGTN Español (n.d.), CGTN Europe (n.d.), and CGTN Français. (n.d.). Table 1 provides CGTN account names, the number of posts and followers, and whether Instagram verified the accounts.

Table 1. Posts and Followers by CGTN Account (September 2021–September 2022).

Instagram	Language	Number of posts	Number of total followers	Instagram verification
CGTN (n.d.)	English	1,954	2,375,791	Yes
CGTN Africa (n.d.)	English	974	38,024	No
CGTN America (n.d.)	English	4,076	179,990	Yes
CGTN Arabic (n.d.)	Arabic	1,050	181,002	No
CGTN Español (n.d.)	Spanish	556	96,078	Yes
CGTN Europe (n.d.)	English	2,068	27,404	Yes
CGTN Français (n.d.)	French	681	243,093	No

We employed topic modeling, an unsupervised machine learning technique, to discern thematic patterns within a text corpus based on the statistical co-occurrence of words. The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm, in particular, uncovers latent topics by leveraging the probabilistic distribution of words. It assigns topic distributions to each document (i.e., the textual unit of the dataset). Documents (in our case, Instagram posts), are then clustered into topics based on their word distributions (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003).

We combined posts from all CGTN language accounts into a single dataset. Before running LDA, the Arabic, Spanish, and French posts were translated into English using Google Translate, as running separate models for each language would have produced nonaligned topics, complicating the comparability of results. Both the translation and the results were assessed by native or near-native speakers on our team to ensure accuracy and contextual relevance. By consolidating all posts into a single language, we aimed to achieve a more comprehensive and unified analysis. This approach allowed us to capture overarching thematic patterns across different linguistic backgrounds while minimizing potential discrepancies arising from language-specific nuances.

We preprocessed the data, eliminating external links, empty entries, and duplicate texts. For improved accuracy, we removed stopwords and extremely frequent and infrequent tokens from the corpus. To determine the optimal number of topics, we conducted a five-fold cross-validation, a method that involves partitioning the data into five subsets, using four subsets to train the model, and employing one to test it. This process was repeated five times with different training and testing subsets each time. By cycling hyperparameters through multiple iterations and utilizing visualization of fit indicators (e.g., Lokmanoglu, Winkler, Al Mahmoud, McMinimy, & Kountz, 2022), we determined the ideal number of topics to be 30. For each of these 30 topics, we identified the 50 most representative words (topwords) and posts (toptexts). These words and posts are representative of a topic because they have the highest probability of belonging to that topic according to the LDA model, thereby making them unique to that topic. We labeled each topic and examined the composition of each topic by language/account. For a deeper understanding of each topic, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the top 50 posts, or put another way, those with the highest probability of belonging to a particular topic according to the LDA model. The analysis was conducted in relation to each statehood criteria, both in translation and in their original language. In total, we evaluated 1,500 top texts. The distribution of accounts in the top texts was 40% CGTN American (n.d.), 22% CGTN Main (n.d.), 11% for both CGTN Arabic (n.d.) and Europe (n.d.), 6% for both CGTN Africa (n.d.), and CGTN

Español (n.d.), and 4% CGTN Français (n.d.). To gauge audience engagement, we calculated the average number of “likes” and “comments.”

Results

From September 2021 to September 2022, CGTN heavily emphasized the four Montevideo Convention criteria for statehood on Instagram. Out of the 30 top topics, 22 (73.33%) focused on statehood. Audience engagement levels with posts differed by topic and statehood criteria. For a list of the top topics, their related number of posts, and their engagement levels, see Table 2. For a list of statehood criteria, their related number of posts, and their engagement levels, see Table 3.

Table 2. CGTN Instagram Topics, Number of Posts, and Levels of Engagement by Statehood Criteria (September 2021–September 2022).²

Montevideo criteria	Related topics	Number of posts	Engagement (total)	Engagement (average)
Terr. Control	China’s space exploration (T5)	340	110,604	325.3
Terr. Control	African lands (T15)	373	6,793	18.2
Pop. Control	Science and technology (T19)	238	30,602	128.6
Pop. Control	Arts and archaeology (T22)	436	95,721	219.5
Pop. Control	Chinese festivals (T2)	543	92,409	170.2
Pop. Control	Beijing Winter Olympics (T9)	556	146,347	263.2
Pop. Control	Anniversaries (T29)	204	29,259	143.4
Pop. Control	U.S. rights restrictions (T12)	299	32,220	107.8
Pop. Control	U.S. law enforcement (T24)	482	62,922	130.5
Pop. Control	Immigration (T4)	351	33,319	94.9
Pop. Control	Transportation (T28)	146	29,488	202.0
Governance	China’s infrastructure (T13)	363	76,151	209.8
Governance	China’s land policy (T25)	405	101,839	251.5
Governance	Latin America politics (T1)	313	20,068	64.1
Governance	Global elections (T21)	241	21,007	87.2
Governance	U.S. economy (T23)	457	40,102	87.8
Governance	U.K. monarchy (T14)	851	33,903	39.8
Governance	Environmental policies (T8)	383	27,614	72.1
Governance	COVID-19 (T17)	537	65,378	121.7
Alliance	Diplomacy (T3)	293	33,205	113.3
Alliance	Russia-Ukraine War (T11)	468	37,018	79.1
Alliance	Ukrainian citizens (T20)	418	28,912	69.2
Others	Chinese citizens (T6)	315	76,672	243.4

² Please refer to the data availability at Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/c78y2/?view_only=640e27e56f314b06870361f747f34f1e

Others	Climate change (T7)	311	42,477	136.6
Others	Mixed (T10)	90	11,279	125.3
Others	Wilderness (T16)	510	119,081	233.5
Others	Mixed (T18)	115	11,761	102.3
Others	Animals (T26)	531	88,339	166.4
Others	Natural disasters (T27)	474	94,641	199.7
Others	CGTN Top News (T30)	172	41,444	241.0

Table 3. CGTN Audience Engagement Levels by Statehood Criteria (September 2021–September 2022).

Montevideo Convention’s Statehood Criterion	Number of Audience Interactions	Percentage of Audience Interactions
Population Control	552,287	33.66
Governance	386,062	23.53
Territorial Control	117,397	7.16
Alliances	99,135	6.04
Not Applicable	485,694	29.61
TOTAL	1,640,575	100

Territorial Control

CGTN addressed territorial control in two of its top 30 Instagram topics: space exploration (topic 5) and African land opportunities (topic 15). Figure 1 shows the CGTN channel breakdown of posts related to territorial control.

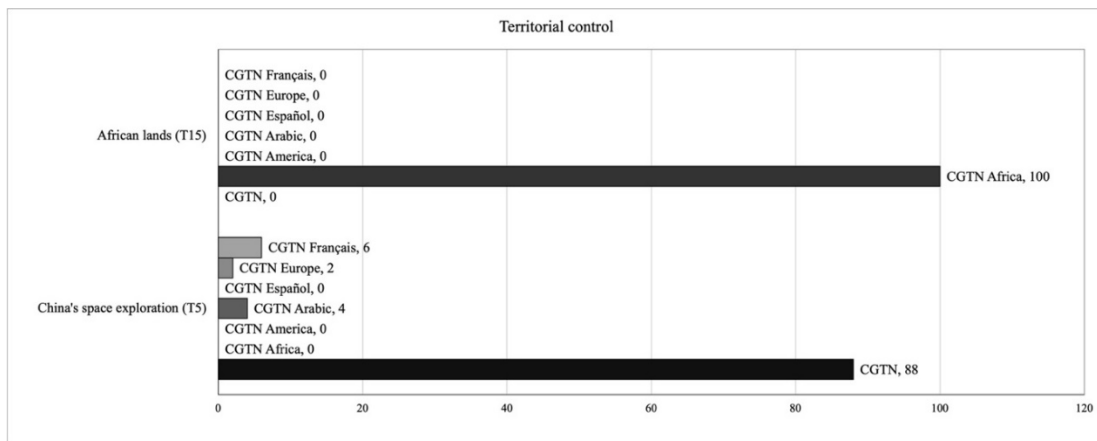


Figure 1. Percentage of CGTN top posts on territorial control-related topics by language account.

CGTN Instagram territorial control posts related to space mostly appeared on its flagship’s English account (n.d.), followed by CGTN Français (n.d.), CGTN Arabic (n.d.), and CGTN Europe (n.d.) in descending

order. The flagship's English posts emphasized China's technological advancements in outer space exploration, including the launch of China's six-month mission on the space station and the astronaut's daily tasks, among others. The single English post on CGTN Europe (n.d.) reported that Chinese astronauts returned to the earth. CGTN Français' (n.d.) approach to territorial control, however, was dual-pronged. First, the account focused on China's achievements in outer space, featuring its successful rocket launches for scientific experiments and resource surveys. Second, the posts on the account revealed China's exploratory drive to other parts of world, including in Antarctic continent and the LNG-powered guard vessels for offshore oil and gas. Like CGTN's other accounts, its Arabic account (n.d.) emphasized China's outer space exploration. Yet, it highlighted the sophisticated and independent intellectual property rights of China's spaceships. CGTN Arabic (n.d.) also moved beyond space exploration to highlight China's deep-sea operations, such as China's first dual-submarine joint operation.

CGTN Africa (n.d.), by contrast, posted images of African landscapes. The posts displayed lakes, rivers, volcanos, waterfalls, coastal beaches, and national parks to highlight Africa's tourist-related resources. Further, and without textual explanation, images of the pristine African lands implied available opportunities for China to expand its influence and regional partnerships through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, China's BRI planned the infrastructure investment of \$8 trillion in the energy, transportation, and telecommunications sectors to link Africa, Asia, and Europe (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018).

Population Control

Nine of CGTN's 30 topics focused on population control. Two of the topics focused on education: one about science and technology (topic 19) and one about arts and archaeology (topic 22). Three others emphasized social events open to the public, including Chinese festivals (topic 2), the Beijing Winter Olympics (topic 9), and anniversaries/remembrances (topic 29). Two topics addressed laws and law enforcement by stressing restrictions on the rights of U.S. citizens (topic 12) and the actions of U.S. law enforcement (topic 24). The final two topics stressed population movement, including one focusing on immigration (topic 4) and one on transportation (topic 28). For a breakdown by language account of the posts related to population control topics, see Figure 2.

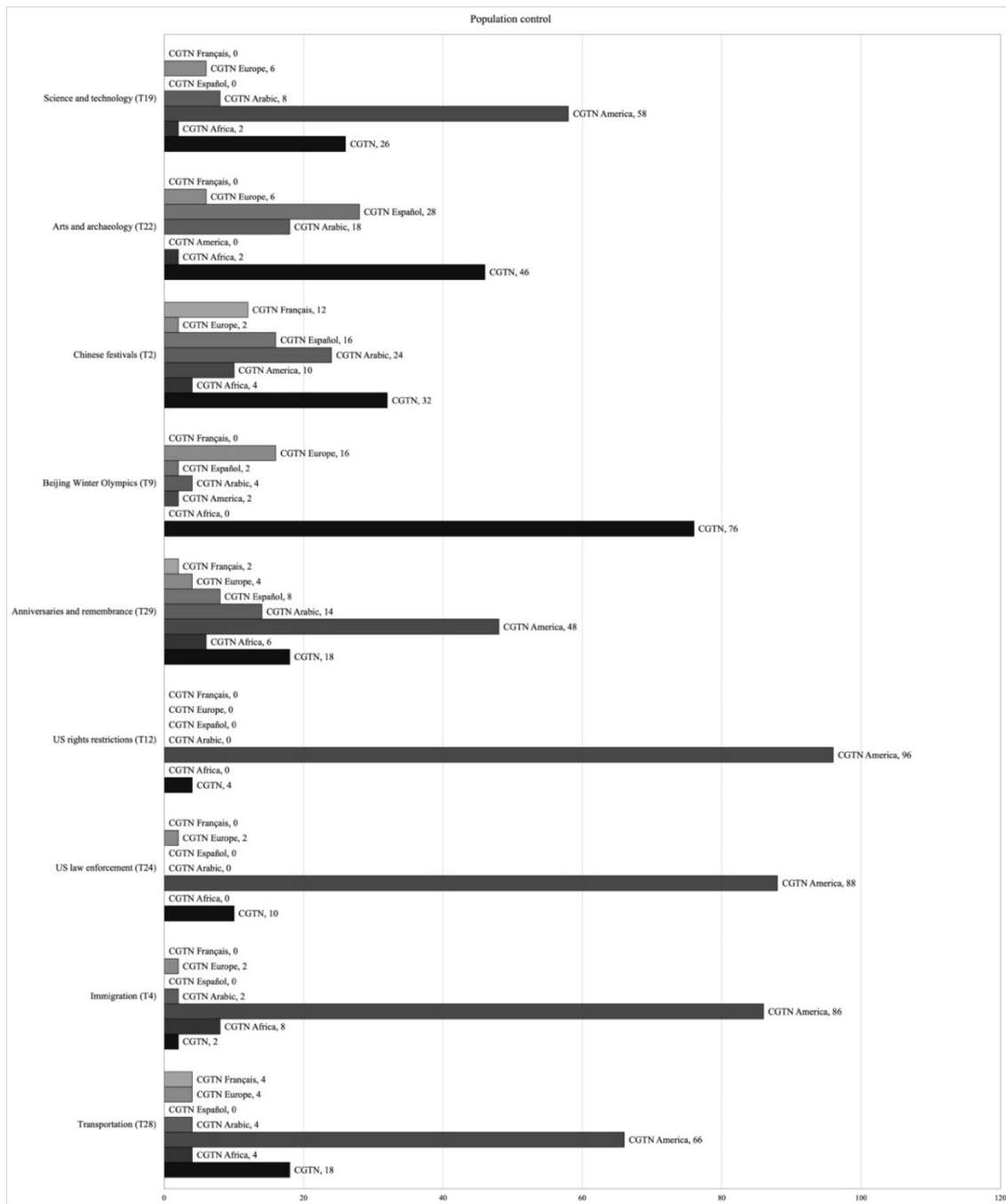


Figure 2. Percentage of CGTN top posts on population control-related topics by language account.

When addressing education as a component of population control, CGTN Instagram placed a major emphasis on technology and scientific research. The CGTN Flagship (n.d.) account's English posts, for example, highlighted NASA's full-color images captured by the Webb Telescope, an image of the galaxy black hole. The English posts on CGTN America applauded Chinese research projects on deforestation effects, correlation between the marijuana use and COVID-19 symptoms. The same account, however, revealed weaknesses in American-based tech companies. Examples included Meta's hiring of a Republican consulting firm to attack Tiktok, Apple suing an Israeli company for monitoring and targeting users, Elon Musk criticizing Twitter's operation for limiting free speech, and Facebook products-aided political polarization in the United States. CGTN Europe had only two related posts, one documenting Elon Musk's Twitter purchase and the other displaying a Tarantula Nebula. CGTN Arabic (n.d.) had only four related posts, two that covered the release of galaxy images and another two on Chinese breakthroughs in fossil archaeology. Taken as a whole, CGTN targeted American English-speaking audiences more than those fluent in other languages by showcasing China's accomplishments and the West's weaknesses in scientific development.

Another focus of population control in the educational sector involved arts and archaeology. Most posts appeared on the CGTN Flagship (n.d.) account touting art exhibitions and ancient artifacts in China, China's intangible cultural heritage, and its archaeological sites. The flagship account also posted archaeological discoveries in Egypt and Italy. Most of CGTN Español's (n.d.) art and archaeology posts also emphasized China, such as the opening of the Silk Road Art Exhibition, but a few posts reported on Spain's presentation of cider culture. CGTN Europe (n.d.) had only three related posts, all focusing on China, including the world's oldest complete printed book and ancient instruments. The remaining CGTN language accounts emphasized the indigenous art and archaeology of the target audience. CGTN Arabic (n.d.) posts focused on activities in the Middle East, including ancient Syria and Egypt culture, the recovery of Iraqi artifacts from Lebanon, pottery pots in the Gaza strip, among others. The only post from CGTN Africa (n.d.) focused on the discovery of the 4,000-year-old tomb in Egypt. Therefore, while exhibiting a limited degree of diversity in local cultures to attract local language speakers, the predominant China-centered posts aimed at promoting China's cultural attractiveness and inclusiveness in cultural exchanges.

Beyond education, CGTN's population control posts clustered around social gatherings. Although each of CGTN's Instagram accounts contributed, the flagship account posts accounted for half of the related posts. The flagship focused on Chinese traditional festivals to introduce its culture across regions and languages. For example, CGTN Flagship (n.d.) and CGTN America (n.d.) highlighted people around the world celebrating the Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, CGTN Europe (n.d.) featured the Lantern Festival in China, and CGTN Africa (n.d.) introduced the Chinese Spring Festival Gala. CGTN Español (n.d.) announced the Dragon Boat Festival in China, CGTN Français (n.d.) highlighted the Mid-Autumn Festival, and CGTN Arabic (n.d.) discussed how Beijing and Shanghai prepared for the Chinese New Year. Beyond the traditional festivals of China, a few posts introduced festivals in other countries. For example, CGTN Español (n.d.) introduced Spain's celebration of Christmas, and festivals in Columbia and Mexico. Flagship English posted about the festivals in Mexico and a traditional wedding in Balkan. Again, the posts attempted to demonstrate China's cultural appeal and the global popularity of its traditions.

CGTN also highlighted spectacular onetime events like the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games as social events. CGTN Flagship (n.d.) was the main post contributor, focusing on the success and achievements of the Chinese athletes and Olympic team. CGTN Europe's (n.d.) posts focused less on athletic performances, while highlighting the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics and Paralympics. CGTN America's sole post was on the World Athletes Championship, emphasizing the performances of athletes from multiple countries. The only two posts on CGTN Arabic (n.d.) were on the Chinese athletes, while CGTN Español's (n.d.) only post was on preparation of the Paralympics in Beijing. Through such posts CGTN showcased China's institutional successes in organizing worldwide sporting events and producing competitive athletes in winter sports, relegating athletes and sporting events from other countries to the periphery.

Finally, CGTN's posts on social events emphasized anniversaries and remembrances. The largest volume of these posts appeared on CGTN America (n.d.), which featured various "world days" for raising public awareness (e.g., World Sleep Day, World Trade Fair Day, and World Vegan Day). In addition, CGTN America (n.d.) also remembered anniversaries of key events in U.S. history such as Juneteenth, as well as political anniversaries of other countries, including National Rebellion Day in Cuba, the 50th National Day in the UAE, China's National Day and Martyrs' Day, and Pakistan's Independence Day. Despite predominant coverage of "world days" to showcase China's inclusiveness, the CGTN leveraged other posts to remind the audiences of the dark colonial side of the Western history.

Law enforcement emerged as the third subcategory of population control. Most posts presenting legal population control appeared on CGTN America (n.d.). They mainly discussed U.S. abortion rights and restrictions. The posts reported the U.S. debate about abortion rights before and after the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, differences in the availability of state-based abortion services, the evolving abortion laws, and protesters against the court's decision. CGTN America's (n.d.) English posts also emphasized U.S. police, prosecutors, and courts, focusing on police brutality, gun violence, and racial violence. The posts tracked recent development in court procedures about high-profile cases, such as the killings of George Floyd and Daunte Wright. Some posts showed the brutality of law enforcement officers in images or videos. Overall, the law enforcement posts showed the institutional ineffectiveness of the United States in population control.

Human movements restrictions constituted the final topic in population control. For instance, the immigration crisis functioned as a key focal point for CGTN America (n.d.). That account's English posts emphasized the migration crisis in the United States and Mexico, as well as in Europe given the Russia-Ukraine War and the Middle East conflicts. CGTN America's (n.d.) English posts also highlighted the suffering of migrants in Afghanistan because of the U.S. withdrawal failure, and African countries because of civil war and leadership turnovers. CGTN Africa's (n.d.) English posts, by contrast, focused only on Africa, including the migration wave from Uganda to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Ethiopia's state of emergency. CGTN Arabic (n.d.) had only one post, which was on the famine in Yemen. By highlighting the immigration crisis predominantly in the United States and Europe, the CGTN Instagram posts indicated the failure of population control of other governments.

Transportation functioned as the final movement-related topic of population control. English posts on CGTN's American (n.d.), Flagship (n.d.), Europe (n.d.), and Africa (n.d.) accounts focused on restrictions and expansions of movement because of failures of transportation systems. Most posts focused on flight cancellations because of extreme weather and the COVID-19 pandemic. Two related posts on CGTN Français (n.d.), by contrast, focused on traffic in China. One covered the inaugural operation of its professional cargo airport, while the other announced the first flight demonstration of its self-designed business jet. The only relevant post on CGTN Arabic (n.d.) highlighted travel disruption because of COVID-19, and negativity of Brexit on Britain's cargo transport. While highlighting the restrictions of movement in most countries, the CGTN Instagram put China in a relative positive light by drawing attention to its cargo airport and self-designed jet.

Governance

Eight of CGTN's 30 top topics focused on governance (see Figure 3). Two topics emphasized China's governmental achievements: infrastructure (topic 13) and land policy (topic 25). Two additional topics discussed political issues: Latin American (topic 1) and global elections (topic 21). Two other topics focused on the West: U.S. economy (topic 23) and the British monarchy (topic 14). The remaining two topics focused on global crises: environmental policies (topic 8) and COVID-19 (topic 17).

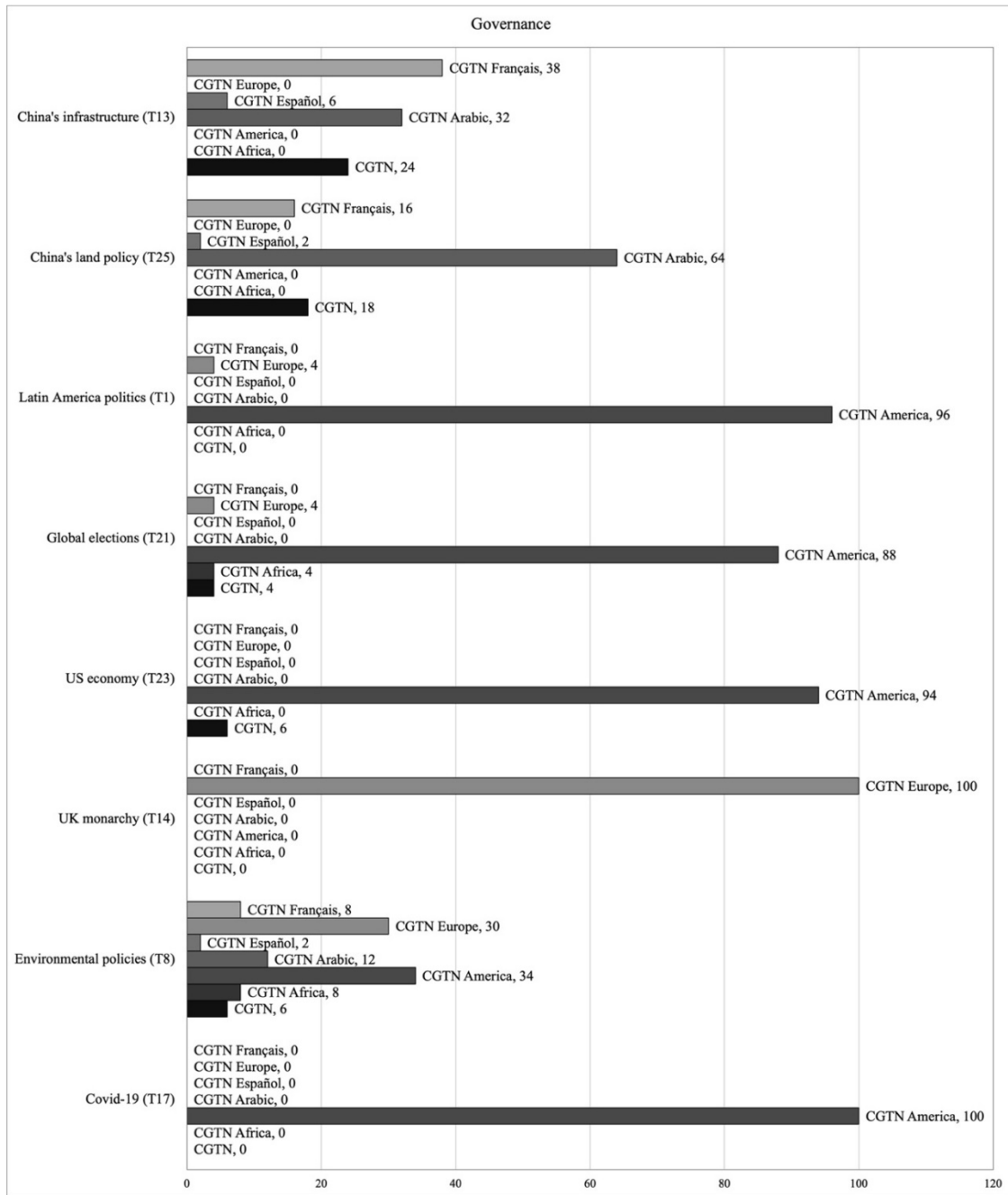


Figure 3. Percentage of CGTN top posts on governance-related topics by account.

When focusing on Chinese governance, CGTN highlighted the nation’s achievements in infrastructure. CGTN Français (n.d.) and CGTN Arabic (n.d.) posts accounted for over half of the posts,

followed by CGTN Flagship (n.d.) English and CGTN Español (n.d.). Regardless of language, all posts emphasized China's successes, including high-speed railway on CGTN Français (n.d.), bridges on CGTN Arabic, light rail on CGTN Flagship (n.d.), and skyscrapers on CGTN Español (n.d.). Together, these posts portrayed China as a modernized innovator and infrastructure developer. A few posts about China's achievements extended beyond Chinese borders, particularly to the Global South. A CGTN Français (n.d.) post, for example, covered the China-Laos Railway, while CGTN Flagship (n.d.) post reported China's export of high-speed trains to Indonesia.

When emphasizing China's achievement in land policies, the most posts appeared in CGTN Arabic, followed by CGTN Français (n.d.), CGTN Flagship (n.d.) English, and CGTN Español (n.d.). Nearly all emphasized China, highlighting China's beautiful landscape and its harvesting season. For example, CGTN Arabic (n.d.) posted a new technique to increase rice production. CGTN Français (n.d.) reported the road infrastructure to revitalize its countryside. CGTN Flagship (n.d.) highlighted its land preservation policy and crop production. The only post from CGTN Español (n.d.) highlighted the Xinjiang's rice harvest. Nearly 30% of the posts featured the harvest in Xinjiang, which offered an implied response to criticism of China's persecution of the Uygur ethnic minority. Outside of China, CGTN Arabic (n.d.) had one post focusing on the harvest season in Egypt. CGTN's repeated references to Chinese successes in land policies across multi-language accounts stressed its superiority in agriculture and implied the value of its BRI.

Politics and elections represented CGTN's second topic cluster addressing governance. When discussing Latin American politics, most posts appeared in Spanish on the CGTN American (n.d.) account. The posts covered political dynamism in Latin America, including the reelection campaigns in Brazil and Argentina, the recall referendum in Mexico, the presidential elections, and the shooting attack on Argentina's vice president. Other posts covered policy measures in Latin American countries, including Colombia's lifting of the mask mandate and Nicaragua's withdrawal from the Organization of American States. By focusing on present-day political dynamics in Latin American countries, including some struggles in those countries, CGTN Instagram posts presented a chaotic picture of democratic systems in the Global South in contrast to the long-standing, political institutions of China.

Governance-related topics also emphasized election and voting. CGTN America's English posts dominating the related posts, followed by CGTN Flagship (n.d.), CGTN Europe (n.d.), and CGTN Africa (n.d.). CGTN America (n.d.) focused on U.S. midterm elections and politics. Its U.S.-related posts emphasized partisan struggle on the voting rights bill and social welfare, and midterm election in Hawaii. CGTN America (n.d.) posts also focused on presidential elections in other countries. Other CGTN language accounts had a much narrower focus. For example, the CGTN Flagship (n.d.) only reported on Brazilian presidential election in Brazil and U.S. midterm elections, while CGTN Europe only covered elections in Columbia and France. CGTN Africa (n.d.) focused on the African continent, including Gambia and Libya. In short, CGTN Instagram showcase the political struggles present in elections both the Global North and the Global South, implying that China was free from these struggles under its governing system.

A third cluster foci of governance concerned the West. One topic focused on U.S. economy (topic 23). The largest corpus of posts appeared in English on the CGTN America (n.d.), with only three posts on the CGTN Flagship (n.d.). Most of the posts emphasized negative portrayals of the U.S. economy, including

rising inflation and its negative impact. While more posts focused on the poor performance of the U.S. economy, CGTN also include some mildly positive coverage of U.S. economic performance. For example, one post reported the higher-than-expected U.S. growth despite slowdown. The three relevant CGTN Flagship (n.d.) posts all emphasized the U.S. economy, with a mixed coverage. By stressing the economic issues in the United States, CGTN Instagram posts implicitly critiqued the failing political institutions and ineffective economic governance of China's rival state.

The other West-based CGTN topic discussed the British royal family and European politics. The posts, all of which appeared on CGTN Europe (n.d.), mostly emphasized public events related to the British royal family, including transition of the monarchy to Charles III, the queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations, birthday wishes to the queen, and the mourning for the queen's passing. CGTN's focus on the monarchy, although fact-based, indicated the differences of constitutional monarchy institution from other political institutions and from potential social changes from the transition of monarchies.

The final cluster of CGTN governance topics focused on global crises. For the topic emphasizing environmental policies, the largest bulk of posts appeared as English-language posts on CGTN America (n.d.) and Europe (n.d.). The English-language research-related posts focused on Maryland scientists inventing sustainable batteries, a think tank report on wind and solar power, and the U.N. report on new energies. Posts about government actions included the efforts of world leaders in COP 26, California's policy to tackle food waste, and Venezuela's "eco-mural" project. In contrast, CGTN Europe (n.d.) focused more on the consequences of climate change, such as heat waves in Turkey and Greece, deforestation in Croatia, and warnings of the Arctic meltdown, among others. English posts from CGTN Europe (n.d.) sought to raise climate change awareness by covering environmental campaigns around the world. CGTN Africa (n.d.) covered primarily environmental issues on the African continent, including Kenya's efforts to stem ocean pollution, a power shortage in sub-Saharan Africa, and Zimbabwe's response to power shortage.

CGTN Flagship English (n.d.), CGTN Español (n.d.), CGTN Français (n.d.), and CGTN Arabic (n.d.) posts presented China's positive handling of environment and climate change. Posts on the various accounts touted China's use of innovative technologies like zero-emission car-wash stations, hybrid energy plants, wind power plants, and rooftop photovoltaic power generation. In contrast to environmental problems in other countries, CGTN presented China's image as a responsible country offering innovative solutions that it would make available to other countries.

Another global crisis topic intersecting with governance related to COVID-19. All posts appeared in English on the CGTN American account, providing COVID-19 updates and policies in a value-neutral way. For example, one post reported India had accelerated vaccination. Another described that the United States' dismissal of marines who refused vaccination. Other posts reported the COVID-19 policy in China and other Western countries. Still, others updated daily cases in the United States, United Kingdom, Poland, and Singapore, as well as the COVID-19 infections of politicians and celebrities. Despite the fact-based approach, CGTN often highlighted the COVID-19 situation outside of China in ways that placed its followers' attention on other governments handling the pandemic.

Capacity for Alliances

Three of the 30 topics in CGTN Instagram posts focused on the capacity for alliances (see Figure 4). One related topic addressed diplomacy (topic 3). Another emphasized an alliance between the West and Ukraine in the Russian invasion (topic 11). A final topic focused on Ukrainian citizens affected by the Russia-Ukraine War (topic 20).

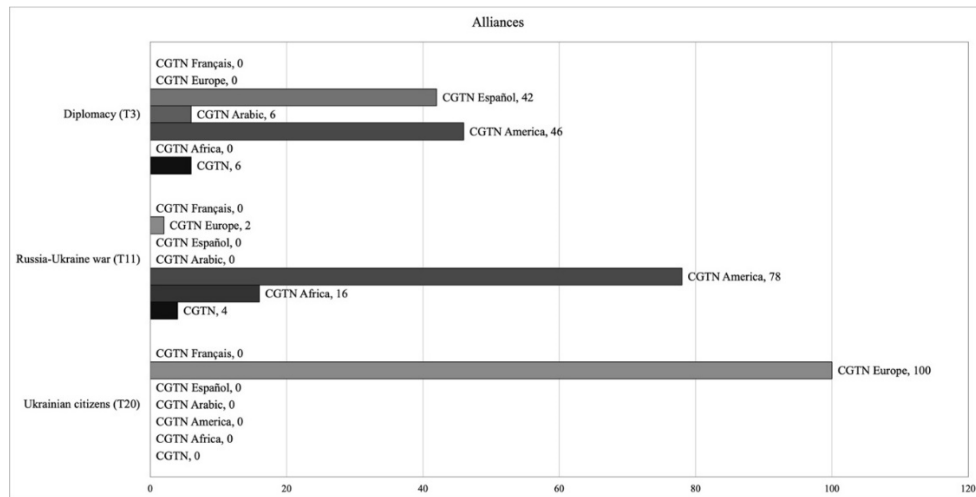


Figure 4. Percentage of CGTN top posts on alliance-related topics by language account.

CGTN's Instagram accounts did stress China's diplomacy with other states. CGTN Español (n.d.) repeatedly posted about the 15th anniversary of the China-Costa Rica diplomatic relationship. CGTN America's (n.d.) English posts, by contrast, posted about the visit by Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, to local Chinese-language schools and Chinese investment sites in the United States. CGTN Arabic (n.d.) posts featured the Saudi government's rendering of architectural awards to mosques to highlight its religious alliances. CGTN tailored Spanish messages for Costa Rica, English messages for Americans, and Arabic messages to Middle East-related alliances. CGTN posts also showed China's appeals to effective people-to-people relations with Costa Rica exhibited in the children's Spanish-speaking video, and with the United States despite escalated tensions between the world's two largest economies.

CGTN also emphasized alliance-building in relation to the Russia-Ukraine War. Most of the English posts from CGTN America (n.d.) focused on the alliance between the West and Ukraine, highlighting the U.S. and NATO allies' commitment to Ukraine, U.S. military aid to Ukraine, European Union's heads of state visits to Kyiv, and the response by the European Union and the United Kingdom to Russia's illegal recognition of republics in eastern Ukraine. CGTN America (n.d.) also reported the visit of U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to the Baltic countries to cement their support for the NATO alliance. The CGTN's highlight of alliance between Ukraine and the West might imply the Western bloc's eastward expansion is the root of the Russia-Ukraine War instead of showing their solidarity. The English posts available on CGTN Africa (n.d.) focused on alliances beyond Europe. For example, posts discussed Sudan's military leader meeting with a Chinese envoy for Middle East affairs and praised China's support for Sudan's political transition, commitment to bilateral ties, and COVID-19 vaccine

delivery. Such posts presented China as a responsible global player seeking to broker peace in the countries of the Global South. CGTN Europe's (n.d.) only English post highlighted Russia's response to the West alliance. It described the Russian president's criticism of the military alliance between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. It also signaled President Putin's stand with China and his threat to provide weapons to unspecified allies in the Global South.

The final alliance-related topic focused on ordinary Ukrainian citizens amid the Russia-Ukraine War. Adopting a humanitarian frame, the posts on CGTN Europe (n.d.) did not explicitly mention any alliances among any states but did indicate China's support for the Ukrainian people who were suffering. The alliance-building strategy was subtler and more futuristic as it laid the groundwork for China to have relations with Ukraine moving forward.

Discussion and Conclusion

From September 2021 to September 2022, CGTN Instagram placed a heavy emphasis on the Montevideo Convention's four criteria of statehood: territorial control, population control, governance, and capacity for alliances. Reporting information with implied assessments of how states either met or failed to meet the institutional definitions both at home and abroad functioned as a dominant theme of China's global media outreach effort.

Yet, the frequency of topics related to the four criteria differed. CGTN was more likely to report on posts aligned with topics of governance, followed by population control, unrelated topics unrelated to statehood, capacity for alliance-building, and territorial control in its top thirty topics. Further, CGTN Instagram limited its reporting to China's present or future accomplishments on some criteria (e.g., territorial control), but on others statehood criteria, the messaging content of the posts placed a greater emphasis on the weaknesses of China's competitors (e.g., population control). Based on the messaging context of the Instagram posts, CGTN appeared more likely to report on subjects where China's competitors were faltering (or could be made to appear so through repeated references to controversial policies and practices) and China itself could claim comparative levels of achievement.

Audience Engagement

Audience engagement with CGTN Instagram top topic posts related to statehood criteria differed substantially from post frequency. Posts about territorial control had the highest levels of audience engagement, followed by topics not associated with statehood criteria, population control, governance, and the capacity to enter alliances. While CGTN may have sought to divert attention away from territorial expansion moves in the South China Sea, Taiwan, or other areas in its region, the platform's followers signaled higher levels of interest and interactivity with territorial-related posts.

Audience Targeting

CGTN's posted treatment of statehood criteria is far from uniform across its language-based accounts. The posts on CGTN Arabic and CGTN Africa appeared the most localized, with the highest percentage of posts

related to infrastructure and land policies consistent with China's BRI. CGTN America's posts focused on population control in terms of the U.S. domestic abortion rights dispute, law enforcement and economy, and Western allies' support of Ukraine in alliance-building. CGTN Europe's posts dominated population control messaging linked to immigration, governance messaging about the British monarchy, and alliance capacity related to Ukrainian citizens. The flagship had the highest percentage of posts related territorial control in space and population control in the Beijing Olympics. CGTN Instagram's sharp distinctions in audience targeting make clear the need to consider each different language account as an independent entity (as well as part of the whole) for analysis.

Implications for Mediated Public Diplomacy

This study adds to previous understandings of China's global media expansion and digital public diplomacy. Moving past earlier work on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, this study focuses on the rapidly expanding Instagram platform. Overall, CGTN Instagram attempts to present China as a diverse and peaceful power with a proven capacity to demonstrate extraordinary achievements, which contrasts with the severe and explicit criticism of the United States in CGTN's coverage of 2020 presidential election on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Colley & Moore, 2022). Meanwhile, by downplaying China's geopolitical ambitions, CGTN Instagram scaled back on the "wolf warrior" style—a more combative, aggressive, and provocative rhetorical approach of the Chinese diplomats on Twitter/X (Repnikova & Chen, 2023), which is intended for the Chinese digital nationalists (Chen, 2023). Instead of emphasizing the aggressive or promotive approach prevalent on other platforms, the Chinese regime has a coordinated approach for international communication that combines distinct approaches. For example, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged a "fighting spirit" in diplomacy while calling for external media workers to project China's "reliable, admirable and respectable" image (Xinhua, 2021, para. 16). The softened rhetoric and promotive approach in CGTN Instagram did not eradicate the more assertive rhetoric toward the West in other media outlets and diplomatic avenues. The adoption of a more promotive approach, instead, helped maintain a sound national image through Instagram's video and photographic affordances.

Comparing CGTN and RT

Building on the findings of Winkler et al. (2022), RT Instagram-related topic modeling during the same time span, this study broadens on previous comparative examinations of the media systems of China and Russia (Meng & Rantanen, 2015; Repnikova, 2017), journalistic practices (Repnikova, 2018), media metaphorical representation (Kalinin, 2021), and cyberspace governance (Broeders, Adamson, & Creemers, 2019). Like CGTN, three-quarters of the top topics of the RT Instagram platform addressed territorial control, population control, governance, and the capacity for alliances. In its top 30 topics (Winkler et al., 2022),³ RT produced the same number focused on territorial control, two less focused on population control, and one less addressing governance. Only in alliance capacity did RT diverge, doubling CGTN's topics in the area from three to six. Audience engagement also differed between the two platforms. Posts associated with population control received higher levels of audience engagement for CGTN posts (33.66%) than for RT (24.08%). Posts associated with alliance capacity,

³ All information related to RT in this section comes from Winkler et al. (2022).

however, were lower for CGTN (6.04%) than RT (19.98%). The comparison underscores the need to consider both institutional definitional criteria and audience engagement levels when conducting comparative studies of the global media platforms and their impact.

In addition, CGTN's Instagram messaging approach related to territorial control posts differed from that of RT. Although RT presented territorial control through military and technological might, CGTN touted its ability to achieve the same goal through non-militaristic means. The platform stressed China's potential non-militaristic expansion into outer space arguably through increased surveillance instead of emphasizing China's military exercises and threatening war in the Taiwan Straits or China's territorial disputes with neighboring countries in the South China Sea or the East China Sea. The difference in approach suggests that territorial control posts tend to garner similar levels of audience engagement whether they express militaristic or non-militaristic means of expanding control.

CGTN and RT Instagram accounts also displayed unique approaches to addressing population control. Both emphasized education, but CGTN, unlike RT, did not post information or opinions about U.S. in-school practices in its top 30 topics. CGTN also placed substantially more emphasis on the research achievements of Chinese researchers than RT. When discussing laws and law enforcement, both platforms highlighted the abortion controversy, but RT focused on other controversies such as same-sex marriage, transgender units, etc., that did not appear in CGTN top 30 posts. Both platforms highlighted police brutality, violence, and guns in the United States, but CGTN focused more on life and safety concerns instead of stoking cultural polarization within other countries. CGTN also differed from RT in its inclusion of social events like festivals, sporting events, and remembrances. The divergent approach was stark as CGTN presented a positive view of how states (particularly China) could provide enjoyable and valuable outlets for the populations under their control. Finally, CGTN chose to focus on movement of populations much more than RT, whereas RT focused more on how tech companies sought to control populations in its most representative posts. The higher levels of audience engagement with CGTN's more positive approach to population control suggests that some followers may be risk averse and choose not to consume more controversial displays of evaluating educational, legal, and technological reforms.

CGTN presentation of governance was also distinct from RT. While both global media platforms addressed climate change, COVID-19 regulations, elections, and political unrest, their methods and emphasis patterns were dissimilar. While the RT mainly focused on the governance and management-related issues occurring in foreign countries, CGTN placed more emphasis on China's positive achievements addressing climate change, infrastructural improvements, and agricultural land management at home. Further, RT highlighted failures of governance in foreign rival countries, while CGTN focused more on fact-based posts that often stopped short of value-based stances on global developments. The notable exception related to the U.S. economy, where CGTN often denounced both U.S. practices and outcomes. Finally, RT highlighted instances of political divisions occurring in nations that Russia considered its enemies, whereas CGTN rarely mentioned protests occurring in foreign states, perhaps to avoid drawing attention to its discord at home. The similar levels of audience engagement regarding RT's attacks on rival governments and CGTN emphasis on its own achievements imply that followers consider both the good and the bad as similar relevant in their demonstrated interest in international affairs.

CGTN placed substantially less emphasis on the capacity to enter alliances with other states in its Instagram posts than RT. In relation to the Russia-Ukraine War, CGTN placed less emphasis on available negotiation opportunities to end the war. Instead, it stressed the strengthening alliances between the United States and its allies. CGTN also adopted a different approach of reaching out to Ukraine's rank-and-file citizenry, rather than governments which served as the focus of RT's posts. So, although the futuristic approach of CGTN presentation of China as a potential partner to the peoples of the United States, the Global South, and Ukraine engaged some viewers, RT's more concrete, aggressive pursuit of a wide range of partnerships useful for challenging the United States and its anti-Russian allies drew in more than double the number of engaged audience members.

All in all, the differences between RT and CGTN might be attributed in large measure to the relations of Russia, China, and the West. Russia has suffered Western isolation and sanction since it annexed Crimea in 2014. Additional Western sanctions due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine likely heightened Russia's hostility toward what it considered the West-led international order. China's worsening relations with the United States since the China-U.S. trade war, however, made it more willing to engage with Europe and Africa to balance its relations with the United States.

Future Studies

At least five areas of future research are needed. First, as Instagram is a social media platform for sharing photos and videos, future studies should focus on how the CGTN uses visual and photographic to appeal to audiences, which is of significance to broader visual rhetoric studies. Second, CGTN's recurrent usage of implied criticism of the United States identified here suggest that future studies should more thoroughly examine how the Chinese global media apparatus uses coded languages to inflict reputational damage to its rivals, which contributes to the field of communication in international relations. Third, this study's quantitative assessment of audience engagement should be supplemented with qualitative assessments of the posts that garnered the higher levels of engagement. For example, thematic analysis of how social media users engage with the state-owned media platform in response to social media posts will reveal whether or to what extent the audience-engaging strategies are effective. Fourth, CGTN's focus on the institutional definition of statehood suggests a need to explore how and to what extent the Montevideo Convention criteria of statehood functions within China's domestic messaging and other CGTN platforms like Facebook and YouTube, and so on. Finally, scholars should analyze how and why the CGTN Instagram accounts adopted different approaches from other state media channels. In-depth interviews or participant observation within the media institution might reveal more nuances about the internal operation of the state media institution.

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Appendix 1

Top Topics and Words for CGTN Instagram Posts (September 2021–September 2022).

Topics	Topwords
1. Latin American politics	now, also, set, week, dog, de, home, americ, #featur, film
2. Chinese festivals	chines, festiv, #cgtn, tradit, celebr, year, flower, spring, tree, full
3. Diplomacy	school, may, student, visit, also, call, chines. Includ, children, relat
4. Immigration	peopl, countri, say, thousand, govern, border, migrant, million, face, forc
5. China's space exploration	china, space, #cgtn, first, launch, station, chines, ship, three, technolog
6. Chinese citizens	work, help, life, famili, can, young, make, said, save, love
7. Climate change	water, island, high, part, temperatur, air, record, sever, level, weather
8. Environmental policies	chang, climat, power, use, plant, can, energi. #environ, #climatechang, ocean
9. Beijing Winter Olympics	winter, beij, olymp, game, team, women, #beijing2022, event, sport, open
10. Mixed	year, time, first, new, last, sinc, two, month, one, four
11. Russia-Ukraine War	said, country, protest, russia, minist, presid, militari, ukrain, prime, govern
12. U.S. rights restrictions	u., state, biden, said, right, law, court, #cgtnamerica, white, feder
13. China's infrastructure	citi, meter, build, bridg, train, road, line, #topcgtn, open, construct
14. U.K. monarchy	link, read, bio, #cgtnnew, #cgtneurop, #cgtneuropenew, #cgtn, across, europ, latest
15. African lands	africa, #africa, good, morn, #african, south, african, #travel, kenya, one
16. Wilderness	#cgtn, photo, river, water, taken, lake, show, photograph, fish, captur
17. COVID-19	covid-19, vaccin, health, case, new, test, u., report, week, hospit
18. Mixed	take, look, one, like, place, mani, see, street, around, part
19. Science and technology	new, accord, say, research, use, group, company, found, human, studi
20. Ukrainian citizens	reuter, ukrain, #ukrain, ukrainian, #russia, region, russian, afp, resid, people
21. Global elections	presid, elect, support, vote, former, nation, hous, pass, includ, new
22. Arts and archaeology	cultur, art, artist, museum, exhibit, site, display, ancient, #cgtn, creat
23. U.S. economy	million, \$, increas, food, price, rise, percent, accord, billion, u.
24. U.S. law enforcement	polic, kill, offic, investig, attack, shoot, said, three, report, gun
25. China's land policy	china, provinc, #china, citi, local, region, east, area, villag, counti
26. Animals	park, anim, #anim, natur, #cgtn, giant, protect, zoo, bird, panda
27. Natural disasters	peopl, fire, caus, least, home, flood, rain, hit, storm, report
28. Transportation	citi, friday, monday, two, said, saturday, travel, close, worker, due
29. Anniversaries and remembrance	world, day, nation, around, mark, intern, countri, peopl, unit, held
30. CGTN Top News	show, cgtn, week, us, media, pic, video, watch, come, social